

DWELLING IN THE FOREST: NATURE, SOCIETY, AND POWER IN TRIBAL
CENTRAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the lives of indigenous communities in India and their relationships to the environments and landscapes of their subsistence through an ethnography of the Baiga, a forest-dwelling, cultivator community who negotiate their everyday access to forests and land amidst shifting historical, legal and policy regimes of rights and access.

Taking as its point of departure a particular conjuncture in Indian ecological history, the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (2007), when *forests* and *forest dwellers* in their mutual entwinement come to be visible to the state and law, this dissertation asks: what does it mean to dwell in a forest today, when dwelling is taken both as the daily work of making worlds more habitable, and the legal - governmental object of regulation and recognition?

Each chapter explores a distinct threshold of being or becoming human in relation to an external world signalled as ‘nature,’ by tracking a particular aspect, trajectory, or predicament of Baiga subsistence and livelihood.

The first chapter follows women into the forest as they gather forest produce, suggesting that people become perceiving organisms in the course of doing daily subsistence tasks and that perception itself is distributed rather than anchored in a perceiving subject. The second chapter considers the emergence of notions of self and other around questions of possession and property, exploring practices of land-making under conditions of land scarcity and the fluidity of state land categories, through a village land dispute. The third chapter shows how the Baiga were historically made into subjects of nature by examining debates around the colonial program for restricting shifting cultivation that cast the Baiga as wild, upland, unruly ‘forest-dwellers,’ in opposition to Gond as sedentary cultivators. The fourth and final chapter reengages the question of how Baigas are made into subjects of nature from

a contemporary perspective, by examining how villagers make claims on the state, and the manner in which such acts of claiming bring their ‘bodily natures’ into the political domain.

Thus, this dissertation tracks how contemporary Baiga selfhood and subjectivity are expressed in relation to their everyday environments of subsistence in the context of contemporary and historical vectors of state intervention in the lives and habitations of indigenous communities in India.

Based on 22 months of fieldwork in a predominantly ‘tribal,’ ‘indigenous’ or ‘adivasi’ district of central India, the dissertation draws on close participant observation with farmers and forest dwellers, NGO activists and forest officials of the Baigachak region; interviews and conversations with Delhi-based environmentalists, activists, bureaucrats and journalists shaping national forest legislation; and select historical documents on the formation of the Baigachak as well as contemporary news coverage— local and national— of the Baiga and other forest-dwelling communities.

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DEDICATION

For my parents, Sudha and Seshadri Ratnam

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INTRODUCTION

Leafing through the notes that I assiduously maintained during fieldwork, I found my attention returning to jottings from two separate occasions. At the time, I did not much know what to make of the conversations and events that I recorded, but it is clear to me now that they capture something vital about the forest milieu that I inhabited for two years, in the far eastern corner of the vast central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. I begin this dissertation with an account of these fleeting impressions and encounters.

April, 2012.

It is nearing the end of my fieldwork, the harvest season has concluded, and everywhere I look, people are busy making additions and repairs to their homes. I arrive at Sukhram Baiga's house in Madagaur village, to find the front yard empty and squeals and peals of laughter coming from the backyard. Making my way round to the back, I find Sukhram's family members looking hot and dusty, engaged in carting bricks from the back garden where they had recently been baked to the cattle pen, next to which an additional room was being built. Gopal, Sukhram's eldest son, has fashioned a simple cart made from logs of wood nailed together to which he has fastened a length of twine. Neighborhood children load the bricks on to the cart, running along with it as Gopal or his brother wheeled it to the unfinished wall. There they help unload the bricks. When the cart is empty, they pile onto it with great excitement, yelling with glee as it hurtles back to the kiln at top speed, throwing up clouds of dust. The most precocious of the kids, balancing at the edge of this contraption, toots an imaginary horn and chivvies the others in a credible imitation of Samnapur's notorious bus drivers.

Later that evening, Gopal showed me the cart he'd fashioned. He ran his hands over it—the saja tree was solid enough for the planks, the trunk of the tinsa had been sawed into 4-inch thick spherical discs and whittled smooth to form the wheels. Bits of wood had been sharpened to form nails that held the cart together; this effective little machine simplified the task of hauling bricks, and relieved its tedium. I perched, scribbling notes, on the hewed stump of a tree whose name I did not think to ask, so successfully had it merged into the furniture of the house. Gopal's mother, Phulwati stood nearby, watching us. "The *jangal* is our *maai-baap* (mother-father), our *bada aadmi* (big man)", she supplied helpfully. "It's there...now... so... life can go on. Who knows when the state will take all this, a wire-fence around it, already see, how many trees they have cut". Leaning against the doorpost, clad only in her short Baigani saree, her limbs dusty from the labors of the day, Phuwalti shrugged, gesturing to herself, and continued— "We are like this only, the Baigas. The state tries a lot to improve us, tries many things, but with no success. But you know that about forest people, Mayawati, you have been here long enough."

August, 2010.

It was my first visit to Dindori, a densely forested, predominantly 'tribal' district on the border between the states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Ekta Parishad¹ activists decided to rent a jeep for a day to conduct field visits to five or six villages. Meera, the EP coordinator for Dindori, was keen to give me a tour of the area and also to cover more villages in the course of the day. On our way, she talked fast about the land and forest conflicts plaguing the area's inhabitants and Ekta Parishad's role in alleviating their problems. Reeling from a blur of first impressions, I struggled to make sense of what was going on around me.

One of the villages we visited on that occasion was Chapwar, a cluster of dispersed hamlets about 35 kilometers away from the main Samnapur block-level administrative center. A dirt track led up to Chapwar from one of the main radial roads connecting Samnapur to more distant villages. The jeep rumbled along, making what sounded like an awful noise disrupting the quiet of the fields. Without any sense of entry into a neighborhood or locality, we drove right up to a small, single mud-brick house, nestled in the middle of a tall, golden-ripe cornfield. The house was padlocked, its owners appeared to be away. Not a sound was to be heard as we disembarked and looked around, till a rustling in the corn surrounded us attracted the attention of the jeep's driver. Diving into the corn to investigate, he returned triumphantly a few minutes later with a sullen-looking man bearing a staff and clad in traditional Baiga male attire— a loin-cloth with black vest, his hair wound in a bun. When asked why he had been hiding, he muttered: "Heard the vehicle... thought it was the *karamchari* (officials)". After recognizing some of the activists however, he unlocked the house and we were invited inside to find his wife sitting still by the fire and a motely group of children hushed and bundled in a corner.

It transpired that Chapwar was one of the few remaining villages in the area whose residents still practiced shifting cultivation (*bewar*), setting fire to the undergrowth and sowing *kodo* and *kutki*, coarse small millets conducive to being grown on gentle slopes with red laterite soil. *Bewar* had long been outlawed as part of the colonial state's enclosure of the forest and the sedentarization of local tribespeople, who were forced to take up plough-farming and rice cultivation. In the present-day, villagers mostly turned to *bewar* when existing food sources from privately farmed lands proved insufficient to last through the year, and not firing up *bewar* friendly fields was thought of as wasteful, letting go of a desperately

¹ Ekta Parishad, which I will sometimes abbreviate to EP, is a 'social movement' headquartered in Bhopal, the state capital of Madhya Pradesh, where I did my fieldwork. EP works primarily on land security issues for the rural poor in India, participating with other civil society groups at the national level in campaigning for the implementation of land reform, more equitable distribution of land for Adivasi, Dalit and landless farmers and against the Indian's state's draconian land acquisition laws.

needed food source. But bewar had to be conducted in secret, for if discovered, it would invite the wrath of forest officials, who would then slap cases of encroachment on villagers and fine or imprison them. Jeetu's family (and others in the hamlet) had long suffered such intimidation at the hands of the forest department. "Bewar nahi karhin toh kahaan se khaahin!?" ("If we don't do bewar, where will we eat from?"), he said mutinously.

Gopal's tactile engagement with the cart that he had fashioned and Phulwati's musings conveyed both the availability and nearness of 'nature' as a life sustaining resource, and an awareness of the power of the state to alienate this resource with little warning.



Fig 1. Gopal working on his cart.

In almost the same breath, Phulwati spoke of herself as a Baiga woman and of Baigas as 'forest people,' their bodily natures bound to their forested environment that made them recalcitrant to the civilizing and improving efforts of a benevolent state. The hushed atmosphere that greeted us in Chapwar, on the other hand, and Jeetu's mutinous anger

pointed to the particular predicament faced by forest-dwelling communities in India, whose long histories of settlement and habitation remain nevertheless unsettled, threatened with being upended or destabilized at any moment when forest-dwellers are termed ‘encroachers’.

With Phulwati and Gopal, (over the course of my stay in Madagaur village), I came to share in the sense of the availability and plenitude of nature as a resource for communal life, that was ‘ready-to-hand’². The tall Sal forests immediately abutting their home lent a comforting solidity to this fiction. Jeetu’s fear and suspicion spoke more directly of the precarity of subsisting on the forest margins, the criminalization of forest livelihoods, and of a long history of being rendered perpetual encroachers by exclusionary forest laws. Both incidents capture thresholds of experience in relation to lives enmeshed in nature, particularly as they pertain to communities termed as ‘forest-dwellers’— mostly poor and marginal rural farmers and foragers frequently belonging to one or other of India’s ‘indigenous’, ‘scheduled tribal’ or ‘adivasi’ communities³.

These two incidents, displaced in time and space, strike me as extraordinary for how much they convey about the questions that animated my research: What is it to subsist or dwell as human in relation to, beside or alongside an external world signaled as ‘nature’?

² I use ‘ready-to-hand’ in Martin Heidegger’s sense of the particular mode of availability of nature as a kind of ‘handiness’ where “‘Nature’ is..discovered in the use of useful things” (Heidegger 2010[1953], 70). Dreyfus and Wrathall note that according to Heidegger, “[w]e first encounter worldly things... as available rather than as causally delineated. Equipment is paradigmatic of the available. Something is available when (1) it is defined in terms of its place in a context of equipment, typical activities in which it is used, and typical purposes or goals for which it is used, and (2) it lends itself to such use readily and easily, without need for reflection. The core case of availableness is an item of equipment that we know how to use and that transparently lends itself to use” (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2005, 4).

³ India’s ‘indigenous’ population, enumerated and classified as ‘tribes’ during colonial rule, came to be re-classified as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ when the Constitution of India was adopted in 1950 (See Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, May 2014; hereafter, Tribal Committee Report or TRC). The term ‘Adivasi’, is also used by many tribal communities as a term of self-reference and assertion. Each of these terms has a complex genealogy interweaving colonial ethnological enumeration, postcolonial administrative re-classification, the politics of self-assertion by various groups and integration into transnational indigenous rights discourses (Beteille 1998; Hardiman 1987; Kapila 2008, Karlsson 2003). I will not parse these terms in this dissertation, but use them interchangeably, acknowledging that the use of each of these terms is semantically loaded.

How does the sensory immediacy of this relationship to an external nature connect to an imagination of selfhood as also natural or tied to nature? How are such experiences and imaginations imbued with historical and contemporary trajectories of state intervention into the lives and landscapes of ‘indigenous’ adivasi’ or ‘tribal’ communities in India?

In this dissertation, I track these questions ethnographically through a study of the Baiga, a ‘primitive’ tribal group, domiciled mostly in central India, and how they negotiate their everyday access to forests and land, amidst shifting historical, legal and policy regimes of rights and constraints. Each chapter of this dissertation tracks how Baiga selfhood and subjectivity come to be distributed, expressed or produced in relation to something larger— a forest landscape of subsistence, a terrain of land and property, a historical trajectory of improvement and government, and contemporary vectors of legal and state recognition. With each chapter, we get a progressive sense of how the very existence of forest-dwellers— as foragers, aspiring land-owners, shifting cultivators and claimants on the state— becomes problematic for the state and is made the object of indifference, intervention, regulation or recognition.

Classical discussions of human-nature relationships in anthropology have tended to reify ‘culture’ as a sort of universally human cognitive response to living proximate to natural worlds, an external reality that furnishes the very categories of thought by which important operations such as classification, differentiation, enumeration and criteria of relatedness can be determined (Descola 2013; Descola and Palsson 1996; Levi-Strauss 1966). The question of ‘nature’ in anthropology has moved far beyond these early structuralist discussions (a point I discuss in some detail in Chapter 1), but the essential point is that an anthropology of nature has also centrally been about an anthropology of experience— a direct, unmediated connection with the natural world that can tell us something important about how humans

organize both their inner lives and their social lives often to the exclusion of any institutional and structural constraints.

In contrast, the scholarship on forest or land-dependent or riverine or coastal communities in India has tended to focus much more on dynamics of access, legality, power, inequality and exclusion⁴. This dissertation trains the focus on the experience of forest and land dependent tribal communities, asking if an immersive relationship of immediacy with nature must necessarily be thought of in exclusion to considerations of power, inequity or institutional intervention. Conversely, in what ways do daily negotiations with prevailing power structures draw the sensory, bodily, communally shared experience of nature, and the experience of ‘bodily natures’ (Alaimo 2010) into the domains of the social and political? Thus, while the first two chapters focus on the shared experience of forest and land as resources that are available for the nourishment of the community, but constantly vulnerable to being alienated, the latter two are a more direct engagement with state power and the ways in which the experience of nature is regulated, governed and articulated. Over the course of the chapters, I bring anthropological debates on human-nature relationships, on perception, property, and state power in conversation with the contemporary predicaments of resource-dependent communities in India and the historically fraught relationships they share with the environments of their subsistence.

The initial context for this research was offered by the enactment, in 2006, of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act,

⁴ An extensive literature analyses political and social conflict in forests. See for example: Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Akhileshwar Pathak, *Contested Domains: The State, Peasants and Forests in India*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1994); Arupjyoti Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also: R. Guha and M. Gadgil, “Forestry and Social Conflict in British India,” *Past and Present*, No. 123 (May, 1989): 141-177; Poffenberger and McGean, *Village Voices, Forest Choices: Joint Forest Management in India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

following years of activism and negotiation between civil society organizations, bureaucrats and officials and lawyers⁵. The stated aim of this legislation (hereafter the Forest Rights Act or simply, FRA) was to reverse the ‘historical injustice’ by which exclusionary forest laws initiated by the colonial administration in the late nineteenth century had enclosed wooded areas, commons and wastelands, making encroachers out of local communities who had lived in and subsisted off these landscapes for centuries⁶. The Act recognizes and vests settlement rights particularly in groups known as ‘Scheduled Tribes’, as India’s 100 million strong population of ‘indigenous’ or ‘aboriginal’ peoples are known⁷. The overwhelming majority of tribal individuals continue to live in rural areas, engage in primary sector occupations, and many are entirely dependent on forests, rivers, and agricultural land for their livelihoods⁸. The Act has been widely hailed as a landmark step in the democratisation of forest governance (Lele and Menon 2014). My initial interest was to explore how the idea of the idea of the ‘forest dweller’— a term with a particular, problematic history of use⁹, was given a new lease of life by the Forest Rights Act. How were forest-dependent, scheduled tribal communities, who were to be the principal beneficiaries of this law, re-articulating their relationship to the forest in order to be seen as legitimate claimants who had a right to subsist in the forest? With this aim, I planned to conduct an ethnographic study of forest conflicts in

⁵ The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. *Gazette of India Extraordinary*, Ministry of Law and Justice, New Delhi, the 2nd of January, 2007.

⁶ The Preamble to the Act states: “An Act to recognise and vest forest rights and occupation in forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in forests for generations but whose rights could not be recorded;... [a]nd whereas the forest rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognised in the consolidation of state forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustice to the forest dwelling scheduled tribes...” (GOI 2007).

⁷ Population of Scheduled Tribes in 2011 Census, sourced from the website of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, <http://tribal.nic.in/writereaddata/AnnualReport/ScheduledTribesinIndiaasRevealedinCensus2011.pdf>. Accessed, August 19, 2017.

⁸ For a detailed, India-wide demographic profile of tribal communities, population and geographic distribution, and occupational structure, please see TCR 2014, pp. 34-50.

⁹ Indologists and historians of pre-colonial India, for instance, have studied the ‘forest dweller’ in terms of a structural opposition between forest and field, the inhabitant of the *vana* or wilderness rather than the *ksetra* or settled space, and the forest as a contrast to settled, agrarian village life (Malamoud 1996, Parasher-Sen 1998, Sontheimer 2001, Thapar 2001).

eastern Madhya Pradesh, the state with the largest area under forest cover, a contentious history of state-forest-tribal relations, and with a significant population of Scheduled Tribal groups¹⁰. I decided to focus my study on the Baiga, formerly present in state classification as a 'Primitive Tribal Group' (PTG) which nomenclature has now been changed to 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group' (PVTG).

The Baiga, who, according to unofficial estimates, number about one million individuals, reside mostly in certain districts of the central Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, but predominantly in Mandla and Dindori, and are at the center of many current interventions into securing tribal livelihoods and rights to forests. The subjects of one of the earliest monograph-length studies of an Indian 'tribe,'¹¹ the Baiga have also been subjected to a long history of representations and interventions as 'wild', 'upland' forest-dwelling tribes, confined to a state of nature, and yet to attain full humanity¹². Even though 'tribal' or 'indigenous' communities in India are far more stratified and part of complex circuits of movement and integration into wider agricultural and urban communities, such narratives continue to reproduce themselves as local common-sense, and also make their way into official documents, NGO reports, journalistic accounts, even becoming part of legal and state policy.

¹⁰ According to the State of Forests Report, 2011, 30% of Madhya Pradesh is recorded forest area and 14.7 % of India's tribal population resides in Madhya Pradesh (Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). <http://www.tribal.gov.in/ST/StatisticalProfileofSTs2013.pdf>. Accessed on August 19, 2017. For an overview of forest conflicts in Madhya Pradesh, see: *Land Reforms in India: Issues of Equity in Rural Madhya Pradesh. Vol. 7, Madhya Pradesh*, ed. Praven Jha (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 2002). See also: Madhu Sarin, "Undoing Historical Injustice: Reclaiming Citizenship Rights and Democratic Forest Governance through the Forest Rights Act," in *Democratising Forest Governance in India*, Sharachandra Lele and Menon, A. eds., pp. 100-146 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014),

¹¹ See Verrier Elwin's famous ethnological work: *The Baiga* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007).

¹² See, for example Colonel Ward's *Mandla Settlement Report of 1868*, discussed in some detail in chapter 3. In *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India Vol. 1* (MacMillan and Co. London, 1916), R.V. Russell repeatedly describes the Baiga as having 'lost' their distinctive identity and language and having adopted 'the local Aryan vernaculars'. In *The Highlands of Central India*, Fredrik James Forsyth describes both the 'Byga' and their practice of shifting cultivation as the single biggest threat to the forest (Forsyth 1889).

I had initially planned to conduct my research focussing on a detailed ethnography of the claims process under the FRA, but this proved much harder to implement than I had anticipated, for a number of reasons. Boundary skirmishes and conflicts between villagers and the forest department over forest encroachments were routine in Samnapur, but intensified in villages where there was a significant overlap between village and forest boundaries. These were also the villages that were most active and expedient in filing claims for title to forest land under the FRA. The majority of these villages were located within the original ‘Baigachak’ or Baiga reserve (discussed in chapter 3) in the densely forested southern Dindori range, that was poorly served by transport networks and practically unnavigable in the rains.

Heavily dependent on Ekta Parishad (EP), the NGO who facilitated much of my access to villages during the initial months of fieldwork, my trips were limited to those villages that formed their core constituency, where they nurtured ‘samoochs’ or collectives of members, who in turn urged other villagers to participate in the massive land rights mobilization that EP was planning. While I learned much traveling about with EP staff, agitating for forest rights took something of a backseat in their activities to planning for the great land march of 2012, the *Jana Satyagraha* or People’s March for Truth. I made several attempts to engage a research assistant, but without success. Daunted at the thought of going it alone, I eventually settled for doing fieldwork in Madagaur, a village about 25 kilometers northwest of Samnapur, in the northern part of Samnapur range, which was far more degraded and deforested than the southern part, but slightly closer, with a rickety bus that dropped me about 6 kilometers away from Madagaur, to the village of Manikpur. Madagaur’s population comprised in almost equal parts Gond and Baiga, with some Ahir and Kol families, and the EP activists who ‘managed’ Madagaur as a field assured me that there were enough conflicts around forests and animosity between Gonds and Baigas over land claims to

keep me busy. Madagaur's villagers appeared disinterested in the FRA and the opportunity that had opened up to file claims for title under this Act. As I realized much later, there were significant reasons for why they were seen (by NGOs and state officials) and saw themselves as marginal claimants under this Act. Though I spent much time feeling anxious about, and second-guessing, my choice of a 'field village,' the absence of any dramatic face-off with the forest department, or highly politically organized Baiga villagers forced me to attune myself closely to the slow diurnal rhythms of village life that revolved around trips to field and forest, the minutiae that preoccupied the men and women of the hamlet, the games played by children, transactions and exchanges among neighbors, accusations of witchcraft and sorcery, the sadness of death, and the love affairs and inchoate aspirations of restlessly milling youth. Much of my understanding about the ways in which people lived in relation to the environments of their subsistence was absorbed during these extended stays. My research problematic, about selves and subjectivities that are formed, framed and held, if only ephemerally in the course of a dynamic engagement with the immediate 'ecologies of subsistence,' stems from my time spent in the hamlet. It was only much later into my fieldwork that I gained the confidence to venture into other villages in the area, which helped me contextualize Madagaur's experience in light of the wider land and forest politics of the region.

Baiga as Forest-dwellers

The MP department of tribal welfare classifies Baiga (along with Bharia and Sahariya) as a 'Specifically Backward Group', defined by 'previous level of agricultural technology', 'minimum level of literacy', residence in 'extremely backward and remote areas', and 'stable or declining population'. An official in the Baiga Development Authority office at Dindori stated baldly that the only purpose of such proliferating classifications was the

diversion of funds that were destined for the protection of vulnerable communities to corrupt officials. A draft report prepared by the NGO, National Institute of Women Child and Youth Development (NIWCYD) on the 'biodiversity' of the Baigachak, is juxtaposed with the developmental microplan prepared for the village, Pondi, to determine the extent to which the decline in specific biotic species has affected the nutritional availability for the village. The Forest Rights Act in its preamble states:

"...[a]nd whereas the forest rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognised in the consolidation of state forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustice to the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers *who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem* (emphasis mine)" (GOI 2007).

Since January 2016, *Down To Earth* magazine has carried reports of Baigas in Dindori being awarded 'community rights' under the FRA¹³, and more recently, that they are the first community to have been awarded 'habitat rights,' a recognition that transcends both individual and community rights and:

"aim(s) to protect not just land rights and livelihoods of people living in forests, but encompass their whole culture and way of life. these are composite rights over larger landscapes covering multiple villages that that recognise territories used by vulnerable tribes and pre-agricultural communities for abitations, livelihoods, social, spiritual, cultural and other purposes" ('Baigas get Home', *Down To Earth*, 15 February, 2016).

The report further mentions that claims to habitat rights, facilitated by various NGOs and individuals working in the Baigachak area, rely on a gazette notification from 1890 announcing the creation of the Baiga chak or reserve, which was one of the most notorious agricultural reformatories created by the colonial state. By means of such overlapping documentary inscriptions, Baigas continued to be conjoined with biotic ecosystems that are

¹³ "Baiga Tribals become India's first community to get Habitat Rights" Down to Earth, <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/baiga-tribals-become-india-s-first-community-to-get-habitat-rights-52452>. (January 14, 2017). Accessed August 20, 2017.

termed ‘forests’ even though historical evidence suggests that they have long been skilled agriculturalists (Prasad 1994, 2003). The conclusion to the dissertation will raise the question of whether the re-enclavement of the Baiga as ‘forest dwellers’ is part of well-intentioned efforts to secure their land and tenurial rights.

A designated Scheduled Tribe, the Baiga reside in the upland region spanning the eastern part of the state of Madhya Pradesh, extending into the western and northern parts of the state of Chhattisgarh. Baiga are today heavily reliant on forests for most of their basic needs— food, fuel, construction material for shelter, and saleable forest produce. The demographic and socioeconomic realities of Scheduled Tribe communities nationwide are largely true for the Baiga as well. A report compiled by the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact notes that Scheduled Tribes are largely landless poor forest dwellers and shifting cultivators, small farmers and pastoral and nomadic herders, overwhelmingly engaged in agriculture and agricultural labor with very high poverty rates relative to the ‘general’ population and little access to productive assets, sustainable employment or minimum wages (AIPP 2010, 23-24)¹⁴. In addition, ST communities face increasing alienation of land, forest and commons, displacement and dispossession, and a “general apathy of official machinery, escalating atrocities, at times related to assertion of rights; growing clout of market forces; and meagre advancement through planned development efforts” (GOI 2011).

The Baiga face additional vulnerabilities: many stand to be displaced by the proposed construction of a wildlife corridor from Kanha wildlife sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh to the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh. Activists whom I interviewed in Dindori were forceful in asserting that the replacement of mixed forests by the ‘state forest’ comprising mainly Sal (*shorea robusta*) trees had led to the disappearance of several native species of

¹⁴ See Bijoy, C.R., Shankar Gopalakrishnan and Shomona Khanna, *India and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Constitutional, Legislative and Administrative Provisions Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in India and their relation to International Law on Indigenous People*. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP, 2010).

tubers, plants and herbs that supplemented food requirements in lean seasons. Recent news reports have highlighted that incidences of child mortality and malnutrition are high, and the difficulties that Baiga women face in accessing safe family planning¹⁵. Archaic laws relating to the concern over extinction of certain ‘dwindling’ tribes do not allow health centers to offer safe surgical sterilization to Baiga women. In the course of fieldwork, I met several women with injuries and ongoing ailments from botched and illegal sterilization surgeries. Recently, the part of Dindori known as the ‘Baigachak’, a cluster of villages in the densely forested southern part of the district has been in the news as an instance of the successful implementation of the Forest Rights Act, with the recognition of individual forest rights, community rights, and even the right of habitat for PVTG (see footnote 13).

But my decision to do fieldwork in Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh, where the Baiga are concentrated in the greatest number, was hardly influenced by these sober facts. I was completely entranced by my early visits, in which I saw only the lushness of the forest landscape and its verdant fields (I had visited during the monsoon season), its seductive air of remoteness from familiar urban centers. I revelled in the unquestioning familiarity and welcome exhibited by local residents. Its many material discomforts only added to my sense of enchantment, and I decided to do my fieldwork in this patch of the world—amidst the crescent-shaped Maikal ranges, nestled in the easternmost part of the Satpura forming a drainage basin for the river Narmada that originated in nearby Amarkantak. These forests have been immortalised in the fiction of Kipling, the nostalgic *fin-de-secle* anthropology of Verrier Elwin, and surveyed, documented, and assessed by countless colonial and postcolonial foresters, hunting enthusiasts, administrators, ecologists and historians,¹⁶ and I

¹⁵ “Sterilisation Deaths: The Doctor is off the Hook and the Chhattisgarh government’s apathy continues”. Sulakshana Nandy, Scroll.in, (March 4, 2017). “The Deadly Side of Sterilisation”. Jyotsna Singh, D.N.A. (8 July, 2017)

¹⁶ A sample of these accounts are treated in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

had envisioned a sort of tropical, sylvan jungle of tangled undergrowth in which I would do ‘fieldwork’.

Dindori was very different from my imaginings and the forests of central India are tropical mixed deciduous Sal forests, quite unlike the lush Amazonian forests that have shaped much of the anthropological imagination of forests. The landscape when it was not raining was almost indistinguishable from any other rural scene in India— brown, heavily logged and cleared, with extensive paddy fields interspersed with dense human agglomerations and congested peri-urban market and administrative centers. Extended fieldwork also revealed life in and around forests to be more prosaic and humdrum than enchanted— the Baiga villagers of my acquaintance, the ‘forest-dwellers’ that I had come to Dindori to study were, like their Gond, Kol and Ahir neighbors, hardworking farmers with meagre smallholdings, wage laborers and gatherers of forest produce who, for most part had a fairly instrumental relationship with their village forests— chopping wood, gathering leaves, berries, roots, tubers, herbs, mushrooms, and seasonal saleable materials like tendu leaf, sal leaf, chakoda plants and mahua fruits. Village residents were preoccupied with routing state welfare schemes to their hamlets, the education and marriage of children, how to raise money to pay school fees, and the politics of women’s Self Help Groups.

In my initial fumbling formulations about my research project to forest officials, schoolteachers, shopkeepers and journalists, I said that I was there to research the life that Baigas shared with forests. This inevitably invited a barrage of half-patronising, half-derogatory ‘information’— in local lore, tea-stall gossip, ponderous government documents and NGO literature, Baigas were spoken of as some kind of exotic beings of the forest having a natural and primordial connection to forest life. They were hailed and reviled as the most ‘primitive’ of forest-dwellers, their attachment and connectedness to forests and flora and fauna was naturalized as their ‘culture,’ their very bodies were said to bear the hardy, resilient

imprint of tough, forest life. Anecdotes about Baigas' prowess at snaring animals, climbing trees, finding their way about the darkest forest at night, were patronizingly aired whenever anyone asked me about my research topic. Baiga women, dressed in their distinctive attire, when they came to Samnapur to shop or run errands, would sometimes be catcalled by loutish men hanging about at tea-stalls— "*humaara bhi jangal mein mangal kar do!*" ("Invite us into your forest, why don't you!"). Baigas were often the first to be accused in the event of forest offences like wood theft and fires. At the same time, their knowledge of plants, medicines and forest cures was much sought after— The very term 'Baiga' in many sources is used interchangeably with 'gunia,' the term for local healers. Baiga settlements in many villages did tend to be situated nearer the forest edges than those of other communities, and my rudimentary surveys indicated that Baiga families on the whole depended more significantly on forest produce for subsistence and income than their neighbors. Intimate knowledge of local forests was hardly exclusive to the Baiga, though, and it is the aim of this dissertation to show how such intimacies come to be shared and distributed among different social groups and collectives, and are, to quote a recent anthropologist of neighboring Rajasthan, 'agonistic' (Singh 2011), rather than always harmonious and peaceful. Gondiya, Sukhrām's daughter (14 at the time), with whom I eventually spent a lot of my time, came up with a better and simpler answer when curious neighbors asked what the 'city-dweller madam' was doing staying in such an out of the way place. "She is here to learn our language," she said. This explanation sufficed, and for most of my fieldwork, I was a harmless if eccentric visitor to the Baiga hamlet of Madagaur village, indulging in extended stays and forest visits.

The Baiga villagers of Madagaur draw heavily on village forests for their daily needs. In addition, they seasonally gather forest produce for self-consumption and sale in local and national markets. The first chapter of this dissertation describes the gathering of 'minor' forest produce and asks how the forest is perceived in the course of subsistence gathering.

The gathering of forest produce has, in successive forest legislations, wavered between a right and a concession or privilege allowed to forest-fringe communities (Bhattacharya, Bhattacharya and Gill 2017, Guha 1990, Singh 1986). The collection of forest produce is treated as a sort of tolerated biotic interference, from whose sale and revenue the state also stands to benefit. How does this uncertain legal status of something as crucial as gathering, reflect in how people approach the forest as a physical landscape of subsistence?

In addition to gathering forest produce, most villagers have small landholdings which they farmed with paddy as the monsoon crop and wheat as the winter crop. But in addition to their titled holdings, they were reliant on ‘*kabzaa*’ or ‘*atikraman*’ lands— cleared land on the forest slopes abutting the village, that were regularly sown with crop like maize, lentil and chickpea. These encroachments were a source of frequent disputes with other villagers and the forest department. The malleable ways in which ‘land’ comes to be a source of identification between social groups and place, forms the subject of the second chapter.

Since at least the 18th century, the ‘tribal’, ‘indigenous,’ ‘adivasi’ subject has, in statist, scholarly and popular discourse, been made visible as ‘eco-savage’, dwelling in and with nature, outside the pale of the human proper, but also always holding out the possibility of an alternate, superior, more sustainable horizon for humanity. The Baiga are regularly depicted in popular journalistic accounts as ‘forest-dwellers’ ‘forest-people’ living in remote hills, outside the pale of modernity¹⁷. Nonetheless, as revisionist readings of colonial histories of the region have shown, the Baiga were in fact agriculturalists who were enclaved in forests by late nineteenth century land and forest laws. If chapters 1 and 2 examine what it means to take intimacy with nature seriously, Chapter 3 explores the persistence and endurance of these tropes by laying out the conditions of their historical production and contemporary re-

¹⁷ These accounts will be discussed in some detail in chapter 4.

enactments. How can we complicate our understanding of tribal or adivasi communities as ‘subjects of nature’?

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, boundary conflicts between villagers and the forest department were frequent in Samnapur. The last chapter takes up one such instance of conflict, but rather than presenting an undifferentiated picture of the tribal and the state as opposed, the chapter attempts to bring to life the presence of the state in the everyday life of people, pointing to sedimented histories of antagonism and accommodation.

Each chapter is positioned against a crucial *leitmotif* in the postcolonial scholarship on adivasi experience and subjectivity— the sustainability of tribal forest use, vulnerability to dispossession and land alienation; colonial constructions of adivasi subjects and landscapes; and resistance to the state. Rather than conveying an undifferentiated picture of adivasi life as enframed by dominance and subordination, and the exercise of power and resistance, this dissertation hopes to disclose a more granular picture of how the state lives in relation to the rhythms and cadences of everyday life.

Adivasis ‘in,’ ‘and,’ and ‘of’ Nature: An outline of the Problematic

Ecological romanticism and the ‘invention of the ‘primitive’

The idea that ‘adivasis’, ‘tribal’ groups or ‘indigenous’ communities belong to the realm of nature, live in a state of being that is supposedly as natural, pristine and wild as the landscapes they inhabit, has a lengthy colonial history and tangled postcolonial inheritance. Colonial anthropologists like von Furer Haimendorf (1990) and Verrier Elwin (2007[1939]; 1936) were influenced by romantic descriptions of the rural and pastoral in the works of British poets such as Wordsworth and Constable, which sensibilities they imported into their depictions of adivasi life as an idealized alternative to the ravages and corruptions of the

modern, war-torn West. (Guha 1998; 2005, 122-123)¹⁸. The 19th century ‘invention of the primitive,’ (Kuper 1988) was also a product of colonial modes of ordering, enumeration and classification of native populations along racialized and evolutionary lines. In his study of state formation in the forests of colonial Bengal, Sivaramakrishnan (1999, 77) argues that western ideas about nature in the colonies were not unitary, and that it is not enough to identify evolutionary trajectories in the development of colonial knowledge, as postcolonial historiographers of tribal landscapes and communities have tended to do (Bhukya 2008, Pati 1994; 201; Shah 2010, Sundar 2007). Romanticism was not the only tendency at work in colonial attitudes to nature, forests, and communities dwelling on the margins of towns and agrarian settlements. A systematic program of mapping and surveying, material interventions in the form of sylvicultural modifications, and the resettlement of populations within wooded areas were brought to bear on the production of forest spaces. The enclavement of upland and hill communities as ‘tribal,’ marginal to settled cultivation and improved livelihood technologies, ‘the making of tribal places,’ involved hierarchizing livelihood practices and restricting certain practices like shifting cultivation, which in turn involved close observations and documentation of land use practices (Damodaran 2006; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). Which is to say that, although “colonial administrators and anthropologists together created the representations that have a powerful effect on society and politics today— stereotypes of forest folk as living in a timeless harmony with nature, disturbed only in recent times by the market and the state” (Shah 2010, 14), this was possible because nature was as much a terrain

¹⁸ In his 1998 essay, ‘Between Anthropology and Literature: The Ethnographies of Verrier Elwin’ (*JRAI*, Vol 4., No.2, Jun. 1998, pp. 325-343), Ramachandra Guha discusses the literary influences of Elwin’s work. In his renowned 2005 biography of Elwin, *Savaging the Civilised: Verrier Elwin, his tribals, and India*, Guha details the political leanings of the self-appointed (and later, state-appointed) ethnographer of tribal India, which turned away both from Christian theology and Gandhian piety, to a full-fledged embrace of tribal lifeways (Guha 2005). I believe that a closer, more critical reading of Elwin’s ‘cultural primitivism’ (premised on social access to tribal culture and sexual access to tribal women) is required from the perspective of colonial power exercised through vectors of sympathy and desire.

for the exercise of *effects* as of *affects*, for the exercise of power and rule, as of an imagination fuelled by sympathy or romance (Moore, Koseck and Pandian 2003).

Nonetheless, a ‘standard environmental narrative’ (Greenough 2001) came to be reproduced in different strands of postcolonial environmental history, including, prominently, ecofeminist thought, wherein precolonial subsistence technologies and resource use systems were seen as being born of intimate immersion in local ecosystems, which was subsequently ruptured and alienated by the colonial appropriation of nature (Guha and Gadgil 1992)¹⁹. In ‘The Unquiet Woods,’ on the subject of peasant resistance in the Garhwal Himalayas, Ramachandra Guha argues that “many wooded areas were not of spontaneous growth and bore the hill-folks’ instinct for the plantation and preservation of the forest” (Guha 1989, 29). In their later, classic work ‘This Fissured Land,’ Guha and Gadgil argue that caste society provided a scaffolding for traditional systems of resource conservation that colonial interventions into the wooded tracts dismantled (Guha and Gadgil 1992, 91-109). A strong gendering of the idea of a primordial attachment to nature is found in Vandana Shiva’s work in which she argues that rural women’s conservation and agricultural practices are intrinsically sustainable and nurturing of food diversity and security (Shiva 2010, xv). The Chipko movement²⁰ of the Himalayas in the late seventies, which was a protest against the forest department’s replacement of local species with commercially viable trees, and was distinguished by the participation of a large number of women, came unmoored from its local context and became a globally circulating symbol of a distinctively feminine form of

¹⁹ Guha and Gadgil’s famous thesis of colonialism as an ‘ecological watershed’ in resource use patterns has been as influential as it has been the subject of critique. Richard Grove, followed by Sumit Guha, argued that there were great continuities between pre-colonial and colonial regimes (Grove 1996; Guha 2006). Rangarajan (1996) has also presented an exhaustive and disaggregated picture of the reach and limits of colonial ecological rule in the Central Provinces.

²⁰ Chipko, literally meaning ‘to stick to’ involved women bodily clinging on to trees so that they would not be felled. Chipko is credited with providing the global, now almost pejorative name for ecological activism, ‘tress hugging’ (Rangan 2001).

conservation and attachment to nature (Rangan 2001, 32-33). In the late nineties, Edmund Fairhead and Melissa Leach conducted their pioneering study of West African forest systems, contradicting long-term observations of longitudinal deforestation. Synthesizing a range of data— oral histories, remote sensing data and aerial photographs of changing vegetative cover— they argued that forest-use techniques of local inhabitants had actually contributed to an increase in forest cover rather than its decline, as had been argued for decades (Fairhead and Leach 1990).

Thus, very different kinds of scholarship asserting that local, traditional land-use systems were not just technically superior but also grounded in a stable cosmological and moral universe, found alignments in multiple, often contradictory policy-oriented and ideological/activist interventions in local ecologies and economies. Indigenous activists and groups the world over mobilize the trope of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ to make land claims. In her study of indigenous politics in Jharkhand, India, Alpa Shah argues that contemporary transnational politics of environmentalism and indigeneity associate the salvaging of nature with preserving it in a wild, pristine form free of human intervention (Shah 2010, 106). The ‘ecological romanticism’ of these global discourses of protection and conservation extend to indigenous people, who then become vanguards of traditional knowledge systems of sustainable resource use, scarcely distinguishable from the biota that are seen as threatened and in need of urgent protection. Rootedness in land, community and nature become key tropes in the fight to defend the rights of indigeneous groups against the onslaught of state-corporate capitalism and extraction. Groups living in proximity to nature are thought of as not only technically skilled in the management of nature as ‘resource’ but also as embodying the correct ethical dispositions towards their environments – a view that works itself into technocratically designed programs that advocate devolution of forest

governance to local communities combined with a critique of the ‘modernizing, Western-influenced development strategies of the centralized state’ (Shah 2010,107).

In India during the nineties, there was a shift towards ‘participatory’ and ‘community-based’ approaches to forest governance, such as the World Bank sponsored Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme which pioneered in Madhya Pradesh. Policy documents of the JFM program employ a rhetoric of making local users ‘stakeholders’ in the yields from forests; that is, allowing forest-dependent communities a limited share of the commercial yield from forests, as well as limited rights in management, on condition that they would act towards ‘conserving’ forests along plan-prescribed guidelines. The ‘Joint Forest Management’ model signalled a shift from an approach heavily centered around commercial uses of timber ‘with communities providing labor’ to an approach that recognizes both the livelihood needs of forest dependent communities and envisions a certain limited role for local expertise in supporting conservation efforts, in exchange for limited management control²¹. There is now also a robust critique of so-called participatory development from scholars, forest communities’ advocacy groups, and from the perspective of local, situated knowledges that critique the romantic ideal of community implicit in such accounts, arguing that there is a need to differentiate the role played by class, caste and gender in local knowledges (Agrawal 1992; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Robbins 2000; Shiva 2014,). Forest peoples solidarity groups, adivasi groups and scholars have dismissed the World Bank-aided institutional arrangements as little more than ways to further commercialize forests and alienate resources from the poor who are most dependent on them, arguing for the devolution of more substantive ownership and management rights to forests, wastelands and commons.²²

²¹ See for example, World Bank Report No. 34481 – IN “*Unlocking Opportunities for Forest-Dependent Peoples in India*,” Agriculture and Rural Development Sector Unit, South Asia Region, 2006.

²² There was an efflorescence of literature in the 1990s critiquing social and community-based forestry in which the state partnered with multi-lateral donor agencies. See for example: Poffenberger and McGean, eds., *Village*

Critiques of Ecological Romanticism

There is now a thoroughgoing scholarly critique of such tropes of ecological nostalgia as an inaccurate portrayal of the grim realities of contemporary adivasi experience, which is indelibly marked by desperate poverty and the frequently opportunistic and unsustainable use of scarce ecological resources. This scholarship argues that it makes little sense to talk of a pristine experience of ‘nature’, unmediated by questions of the right to livelihood and self-determination, and the contested symbolism around nature, and power and resistance (Baviskar 1995, 1997; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Prasad 2003; Shah 2010). One of the most influential critiques of the supposed romanticization of tribal attachment to nature has come from the historian Archana Prasad, who deconstructs Verrier Elwin’s mythologization of Baiga subsistence practices in the 19th century (Prasad 1994, 2003). This critique is discussed in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

Over the last two decades, critical studies of development, displacement, colonial forestry, state-formation and resistance have sought to rehabilitate the figure of the adivasi from this state of ahistorical ‘eco-incarceration’ (Kela 2012, Pati 1993, Shah 2010) by seeking to unravel the operations of power—in the form of the influences of state and market – that inevitably mediate and render unequal and contested, all access to nature. In key studies such as Amita Baviskar’s account of the iconic Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) and Alpa Shah’s critique of indigenous right politics in Jharkhand social movements and the activists who organize on behalf of rural, indigenous communities come in for a share of criticism – they are the ones who resort to arguments about essences, evoking idealized village communities that use natural resources sustainably, in their zeal to

Voices, Forest Choices (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); N. Sundar, R. Jefferey and N. Thin, eds., *Branching out: Joint Forest Management in India*: (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001).

support communities fighting for their right to retain control over their subsistence resources (Baviskar 1995, Shah 2010).

Ordinary adivasis, these anthropologists forcefully argue, do not conform to activist expectations of pure and unalloyed forms of livelihood and attachment to land and forests, or embody the politics that ought to arise from these primordial attachments. Instead, villagers constantly act in ways that confound any idealized narrative about their relationship to nature. In her long-term study of culture, subsistence and politics in the Narmada valley, Baviskar shows that village economies are sustained by a combination of cultivation, forest gathering, grazing, seasonal migration, and farming on encroached lands called *nevad*, which are lands cleared on forest slopes because legal holdings are insufficient to provide for families all year round. Access to *nevad* lands is fraught, as this land is constantly under threat of being repossessed by the Forest Department, leading to many face-offs and conflicts with villagers who cannot possibly survive only on their legally titled smallholdings. Activists of the ‘Sangath,’ a labor movement that is active in the area, which subsequently joined the famous Narmada Bachao Andolan, attempt to reconcile agitating for villagers’ rights to *nevad* lands with the fact that in several areas, *nevad* encroachments had virtually destroyed all neighborhood forests. Thus, the activist insistence that ‘adivasi culture and politics are authentic only when and if they retain their link with ‘nature’’ leads the former to divorce, even discourage aspects of livelihood seeking that do not align with these perceptions, such as rampant clearing of forests and migration. (Baviskar 1995, 1997). The second chapter of my dissertation deals with precisely this question of clearing land in forests, and the conflicts with state categorizations of land and activist perceptions of land and community.

In Alpa Shah’s ethnography of the indigenous rights movement in the state of Jharkand, adivasis routinely destroy forests and attack elephants, both mascots for the state of Jharkhand, and blame the increased density of neighborhood forests for the increase in

attacks by elephants on homes, fields, and individuals. Even as activists work hard to dissuade seasonal labor migration, Munda villagers flock to brick kilns in Uttar Pradesh, not just to earn money but also to be able to have love affairs. Thus, Shah argues that ‘representations’ of nature directly follow material and social conditions of use, access and exclusion, rather than an attachment rooted in primordial identities.

In Shah’s account the perspectives of rights-based activism and ‘ordinary,’ ‘poor,’ and ‘marginalized’ villagers are repeatedly opposed to each other—it is hard to imagine that there are no politics that are produced as a result of complex alliances that must be forged in order for a movement or activism to acquire any durability or stability in local life. Not only ‘activists’ but adivasis themselves also strategically mobilize narratives and imagery of themselves as nature-loving and nature-protecting, in order to secure claims to forest land. on Shah’s account of adivasis as ‘staying away’ from the state and forging their own alternative, spirit-based ‘sacral polity’ that evades the mobilizations of indigenous-rights activists similarly remains unproblematised, as I will show in the last chapter on Baiga adivasis’ engagements with the state. Finally, to argue that ‘representations’ of nature are a direct product of poverty and inequality of access, amounts to a truism.

What Shah and other postcolonial anthropologists of adivasi landscapes are really contesting is an un-interrogated picture of the adivasi as embodying some sort of primordial, bodily attachment to the realm of the natural, that, on the one hand denies them full humanity, but also burdens the adivasi subject as the repository of the sort of ethics and politics of nature that is authentically ‘primitive’ (Ghosh 2006), and the last outpost of challenge to the ravages of modernity. They counter this view with an account of the poverty and marginalization that propel vulnerable and impoverished adivasi villagers to overuse and destroy the very environments that they are supposed to regenerate and sustain. But, in these accounts, if the poor do not act in ways that are always ecologically sustainable, this

disinterestedness is attributable to their poverty, which becomes its own ethic and politic, an ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Guha and Martinez Alier 2013; Nixon 2011) that finds expression in a variety of social justice resistance movements against displacement and dispossession. The question that therefore arises is, what sort of politics become possible in the face of such constant threats to life, livelihoods and means of subsistence, from displacement, dispossession, submergence and eviction?

The Adivasi Political

As a consequence of postcolonial adivasi subjectivity being so indelibly marked by dispossession and subjugation, tribal political subjectivity has been singled out as perennially insurgent and framed by resistance (Kela 2012). In a brilliant essay entitled “Culture/Politics: The Irresoluble Double-Bind of the Indian Adivasi,” the historian Prathama Banerjee argues that resistance has been a recurrent feature of tribal landscapes since the nineteenth century (Banerjee 2006). Throughout the nineteenth century, tribal communities forced their way into political visibility through political acts against changing sovereigns “variously textualized as insurgency, revolt, rebellion, movement” (Banerjee 2006, 99). Banerjee also notes the inability/difficulty that anticolonial nationalist and postcolonial thought had in admitting the ‘primitive’ in the ‘radical role of a modern political agent’ (2006, 99). To admit the adivasi’s particular kind of politicization within the frame of history proper, nationalist and postcolonial thought ended up identifying “with great unease, but curiosity, the adivasi’s perpetual insurgent state as a particularly ‘tribal’ state of being” (2006, 100). This was a sort of mirror image of the same frame of insurgency that led the colonial state to classify and order tribes according to their ‘intrinsic criminality’ (101)²³. Though rebellion and insurgency

²³ For a nuanced ethnographic understanding of how the selfhood of certain communities marked as ‘primitive,’ ‘criminal’ is linked to the landscapes they inhabit, I draw on Anand Pandian’s study of the Kallar caste in South India (Pandian 2009). This work is discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

can be dramatized as ‘historical event par excellence’ (100), both colonial ethnology and Indian vernacular texts characterized tribes (the Santhals and Hos in particular) as being “primitive, body-centric, unthinking, extravagant, even violent” (101). The perpetually ‘valorous and rebellious being’ (101) of the adivasi was a function of this primordality and passion. Banerjee’s title could have included a third term in addition to culture and power — nature. The adivasi is paradoxically admitted to the sphere of history by being bound to nature — the term ‘adivasi’ itself seamlessly links selfhood and subjectivity to the first inhabitation of place²⁴. The adivasi is thus made to occupy an authentic state of alterity to the modern nation-state both by embodying the pure and unsullied state of nature and of resistance.

This helpful conceptual clarification by Banerjee amplifies the point I have tried to make thus far— about a certain anxiety in the scholarship on contemporary adivasi experience that distance the nature-bound adivasi self and person, from the political subject of rights, power and resistance. Thus there is an unease with a sense of immediacy, belongingness, intimacy or familiarity with an externality called ‘nature’, that might well form part of contemporary adivasi experience in many places, and an attempt to deflect these into questions of institutional and political power, via the route of demolishing the perceived stability or reification of a ‘culture’ conceived as an authentic or direct response to ‘nature’. This dissertation attempts to dissolve this binary formulation by trying to capture an immersive experience of living in the midst of and adjacent to nature that does not eclipse the impingements of state and market, deforestation, logging, mining or state-driven projects of fencing, plantations, or land acquisition.

²⁴ The subaltern historian David Hardiman traces the genealogy of the term Adivasi to its use by Christian missionaries in Chhotanagpur area of Bihar (presently Jharkhand) in the 1930s, where it came into prominence with the founding of the Adivasi Mahasabha (Hardiman 1987).

If displacement and dispossession have been the ‘collective traumas’ that have unified adivasi political subjectivity under the ‘suffering slot’ (Robbins 2013) over the 20th century, then in what does this suffering consist? In simple terms, can we understand the violence of displacement or dispossession without first having a sense of what it is to feel emplaced in nature, to have or feel a sense of ownership or possession of nature? This is not to argue that there is some temporally prior relationship of wholeness or congruence between the social and natural worlds of adivasis as, say, earlier generations of anthropologists of nature and culture have tended to suggest (Descola 1993; Descola and Palsson 1996), but that social worlds are daily built and rebuilt in the course of subsistence activities. In the course of gathering forest produce, or fencing a field, cultivating a crop, or resolving a land dispute, relationships are forged that are at once, intimate, agonistic and collective²⁵. Humans leave marks and imprints on the material surfaces that they engage and work upon. Conversely, they are produced as social persons, administrative categories, and the political subjects of power through the work of ‘nature’ — together understood as physical, inhabited landscapes, the interior landscapes of selfhood (Pandian 2009), and the forms of life that acquire some sediment and fixity in local life. I aim not to turn away from the experience of nature but to recenter it in contemporary adivasi experience. Impoverishment in relation to the natural world need not preclude an ethical or aesthetic relation to this world, and in fact, calls for the working out of a far more nuanced picture of ethics and politics in relation to the environment. What are the ethics and aesthetics involved in chopping a branch, plucking a leaf, chasing away an errant monkey, or killing a chicken? Why do Baiga girls walking up a hill to join their compatriots for a sowing festival, feel compelled to stop and sing a *dadariya* to the valley, when the right moment presents itself? Can we reconceptualize what has been

²⁵ Bhrigupati Singh, “Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration in Popular Hinduism: A Study in the Political Theology of the Neighbor,” *American Ethnologist* 38. No. 3 (July, 2011): 430-450.

criticised as ‘ecological romanticism’ in understanding of adivasi-nature relationships (Prasad 2003, Shah 2010), through the lens of ‘ordinary ethics’ (Lambek 2010)? This is a question I will leave for the conclusion.

Rather than rehearsing revisionist critiques of the nature - loving adivasi or forest-dweller, I argue that the question of what it is to ‘dwell’ in nature must be opened up, not closed off. This ‘dwelling approach’ requires close attention not just to moments of exercise of power and resistance, but also to the unfolding of life experience as it happens, routine practices as well as ephemera — fleeting glimpses, moments of play or levity, worry or distractedness, random musings. Drawing on the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s corpus of work on subsistence communities, this dissertation is an attempt to ask what it is to dwell in nature, when dwelling is taken both as the everyday work of making worlds habitable, and the object of regulation and recognition. This dissertation is thus a preliminary effort at rethinking the question of contemporary adivasi selfhood and subjectivity in relation to the material resources of their subsistence, collectively signalled as ‘nature’, against the backdrop of contemporary and historical governmental interventions into their lives and habitations.

Forest-dwellers in Law and Policy

The question of forests and forest-dependent peoples has been a contentious one in the history of the Indian nation-state. The labelling of forest-dwelling and forest dependent communities as *encroachers* is widely attributed to the colonial state’s takeover of rural, non-agricultural common lands through the process of reservation — according to which the state can appropriate any common land or waste land and deem it a *reserved forest* by issuing a notification to this effect (Guha 1989; 1990; 2000). While the rationality behind the colonial settlement of agricultural lands was revenue-driven, forests were a direct source of untapped timber wealth and hence annexed directly, without any uniform settlement or recording of the

wide variety of customary and usufructory rights and claims that prevailed in different regions in regimes prior to the colonial takeover of common lands. Rangarajan (1996) notes that prior to colonial enclosure, there was only ‘a hierarchy of user rights rather than an absolute notion of property’ in wooded areas (Rangarajan 1996, 13). This changed with the enactment of the Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878, through which all wooded and hilly tracts were declared as state property. A very different cluster of affects and imperatives came to undergird the nature and scale of interventions into the lives of wooded areas and their inhabitants than had prevailed under different pre-colonial administrations. The introduction of ‘scientific forestry’ in the mid-to-late nineteenth century privileged commercial extraction of valuable timber species and elided productive uses of the forest with commercial forestry. The livelihood strategies of hill and forest-dwelling communities such as pasturage, gathering, fuelwood collection, but most of all, shifting cultivation. ‘Customary uses of the forest came to be viewed as wasteful and destructive and thus became a normative call to remedial action through enclosure, prohibition and restriction on customary practice’ (Whitehead 2012, 17). In 1890, the Baigachak, was created through a notification in which all Baiga who refused to give up shifting cultivation were to be relocated and their practice of subsistence confined to a small area in the eastern Maikals. The present-day legacies of this policy of improvement, by which Baigas were sought to be made into model agricultural subjects, is discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

In the post-independence era of forest governance, conflicts between forest departments and village users over forest boundaries have steadily escalated. As greater areas come to be recorded as reserved forests, protected forests, and national parks and sanctuaries within the jurisdiction of various states, common areas adjacent to settlements come to be privatized through various processes of ‘statization’ (Brara 2006) and more and more people come to be rendered ‘encroachers’ in lands that they had been occupying and living off in a variety of ways. Encroachment encompasses a range of transgressions of the occupancy and usufructory rights

allowed to forest-dwelling and forest-dependent communities. Sundar et al. (2001) in their volume on Joint Forest Management in India offer a useful, three-fold ‘typology’ of villagers’ forest uses and the corresponding interface with local forest departments— “tolerated interference, FD-approved involvement, and FD-disapproved practices” (Sundar et al. 2001). The first includes activities such as fuelwood-gathering, small timber felling, grazing and fodder collection - activities comprising “biotic interference” involving activities that interfere with the ‘main task of forest management’. The second involves activities like NTFP gathering and wage labor on FD-approved forestry works, that generate revenue for the forest department. FD ‘disapproved’ activities include all those activities that ‘gain no revenue for the forest department and compete with it for control such as smuggling, headloading and cultivation in the forest especially shifting cultivation. By the logic of such a classification, practically all aspects of a forest-dweller’s livelihood occupy a ‘grey zone’ between legality and illegality (Vasan 2005). The relationship between forest communities and the state has usually focussed on the most repressive instances of confrontation and conflict.

The chapters of this dissertation track instead, the rhythms and cadences of how the state lives in relation to everyday life. Each of the chapters centers one aspect of a forest-dweller’s subsistence life— gathering, clearing farmland, shifting cultivation and grazing, capturing a gradually increasing sense of what it is to be problematic to the state. Thus, we arrive at a more graded picture of how the state lives in relation to people’s everyday subsistence activities, embedded in familiar, local histories of accommodation and animosity.

Historically intolerant as forest laws have been to the subsistence practices of forest-dependent communities, they have also grudgingly acknowledged that there have been claims on forests that predate their takeover by the state. Sukyens (2009) argues that forest legislation and policy in India, since their inception in the colonial period have combined into a working paradox, the image of the tribal as ‘naturalist’ and as ‘encroacher’. The ‘naturalist’

school, closer to the perspective of transnational indigenous rights groups like Survival International and Forest Peoples Project, portrays indigenous people as “pre-capitalist, acephalous groups living in harmony with their natural surroundings” (Sukyens 2009, 382). In such representations “tribals are often depicted in romantic, almost Rousseauian idealistic terms as nature people and *bons sauvages*” (382). Forest dwelling communities are cast as ‘ecosystem people,’ (Gadgil and Guha 1992) rooted in a more ecological state of existence, dependent on forests but whose imprint is essentially negligible - their modes of harvesting forest produce is essentially ‘minor’— low-impact and needs-based (Guha and Gadgil 1993: 133). The other ‘school’ (I prefer ‘tendency’) which Sukyens labels the ‘encroacher school’ sees forest-dependent and forest-fringe communities as encroachers who endanger ecosystems “on a local, intermediate, and, as the absorption of carbon becomes a planetary consideration, also on a global scale” (Sukyens 2009, 384). This point of view, favored by wildlife ecologists such as Valmik Thapar and Ullas Karanth, sees the tribal ‘way of life’ itself as “encroaching upon scarce and valuable natural resources and subsistence activities such as shifting cultivation, clearing forest, degrading land, and clearing again before sufficient regeneration has taken place” (Karanth and Gopal 2005, 384). Even though many tribals are settled farmers, they nonetheless graze cattle that browse and eat new and young undergrowth. The tribal way of collecting MFP is not regarded as sustainable, using exhausting picking methods and by starting uncontrollable forest fires. Finally, tribals are also active in poaching, logging and the timber smuggling mafia (Rangan 2000). Thus, tribals are considered ‘negatively active’ in their relationship to the environment” (Sukyens 2009, 384).

Forest laws, Sukyens argues, bear the traces of both these viewpoints, sometimes with the same section or sub-section of an act treating the forest-dweller both as encroacher and as someone who belongs in forests. When forests are required to be cordoned off so that high-

grade timber can be left undisturbed, the forest is seen to be ‘encumbered’ with pre-existing usages that do not align with statist perspectives of optimal forest use and forest dwellers seen as encroachers. But in order for the enclosure of forests to proceed without resistance or rebellion, pre-existing rights must be ‘settled’. As I show in chapter 2, the ‘settlement’ of rights in forests in Madhya Pradesh has remained an unsettling issue from the immediate post-independence period right up to the present. Sukyens overstates the dichotomy between naturalist and encroacher. It is clear upon reading settlement reports and forest manuals that the propensity to be a wandering, shiftless encroacher was naturalized in the forest-dweller, deemed to be in his very nature (Ward 1870), and recognition that the forest was the tribal’s ‘natural’ abode or dwelling place coexisted with the attribution of an (also) natural propensity to encroach and destroy, once forests were annexed as state property by judicial fiat.

The most recently enacted forest legislation, the Forest Rights Act, in its depiction of forest-dwellers, extends the same dilemma. In those provisions setting out the rights of forest dependent communities, the law is emphatic that these rights stem from a prior claim emerging from longstanding entanglements of residence, livelihood practice and cultural practices. In the provisions setting out obligations and duties the law obliges village residents to exercise specific, communally agreed restraints on indiscriminate use. Unlike its draconian predecessors—the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 (which was based largely on the Indian Forest Act of 1927, the text of which, in turn, was borrowed largely from the Forest Act of 1878)—all of which acknowledge that there are multiple user rights in forests that have to be accounted for and squared away while declaring forests the property of the state, the FRA is unique in recognising forest-dwellers themselves as the rights-bearing subjects of law. Thus, the FRA makes the most explicit connection between the adivasis and forests, naturalizing the autochthonous subject of nature, as also the subject of legal rights and recognition.

Sukyens argues that internal to even this ‘progressive’ Act, is an imagination of the tribal as hardly human. “[O]ne wonders if tribals are even human or whether they are merely just another endangered species whose “habitat” has to be protected. The complete dehistoricization, decontextualization, and depoliticization of tribal society seems vital in order to sustain the discourse of tribal as natural in the legislation” (Sukyens 2009: 39).

This binary of the adivasi as either the subject of nature, or the subject of history and politics, is what anthropologists like Baviskar and Shah critique through ethnographic evidence, and which Banerjee unpacks conceptually, by which the full political subjectivity of the adivasi is only possible at the expense of full humanity; the condition for the adivasi to emerge as pure political subject is that the adivasi remain perpetually nature-bound. Throughout the dissertation, but also especially in the last chapter, I problematize this understanding of adivasi selfhood and subjectivity by showing how the domains of the natural, social and political mutually absorb each other in a distinctly local ‘form of life’.

After Nature?

Across the humanities and social sciences, the nature-culture question is being revived by the scale of planetary crises caused by climate change— extinction, desertification, industrial hazard, toxicity, waste, species loss and pollution. Scholars such as Jedediah Purdy and Timothy Morton have, from different perspectives, argued and augured the ‘death of nature’ - that, in a definitively post-natural world, the concept of nature itself is no longer relevant for a properly ecological form of thought (Morton 2007, Purdy 2015). There is no question of worlds that are not in some ways modified or atrophied by human touch, pristine or untouched wilderness itself has long been shown up to be an artefact of human creation, even fantasy. The post-natural turn has gone hand-in-hand with a decisively *posthuman* turn in critical theory, now enthusiastically embraced by anthropology (Descola

2013; Kipnis 2015; Kohn 2007, 2012; Latour 2013, Mol 1999). Displacing the human as the sole agent of evolutionary progress, history, of technical advancement, or even in sole possession of mind, subjecthood, consciousness, language or tool-use, there is a strong push to see the human as one among a multitude of nonhuman actants (Latour 2013), agents (Ingold 2000) and selves (de Castro 1998; Kohn 2007) — animals, plants, viruses, machines, and elements such as water or air. In her forthcoming work on inhabiting shifting, unstable landscapes along the Jamuna river in Bangladesh, Naveeda Khan wonders as to the eclipse of human suffering from international conversations on climate change. Why, she wonders, might the human and nature ‘not be thought together productively’? ‘Is the turn away from the human and nature an expression of scepticism towards existence as such?’ (Khan 2015). In other words, is it not premature to sound a death-knell for the human, or necessary to pay attention to the distinctly human ways in which life is sustained amidst death-dealing natural transformations? (Khan 2015). This dissertation, as stated in the beginning, tries to capture different valences of what it is to subsist as human — as an organism-self, as a social self, and as a subject, in relations of proximity and enmeshment with natural worlds. This is accomplished by means of a close focus on specific acts undertaken in relation to nature, subsistence practices, space, place and boundary-marking activities, and more political acts of making claims on the state.

Forests are particularly suited to such explorations, for, as many ecologists, economists, natural historians and anthropologists have studied, global forests are highly anthropogenic spaces that have sustained and been modified by human and non-human interactions for centuries. Forests have been at the center of charged social and political conflicts in the ecological history of the Indian nation-state (Sivaramakrishnan 1995; 2009; Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan 2012). In postcolonial India, rampant commercialization of forests, buttressed by a rational-scientific forest management apparatus led to the

replacement of mixed-growth forests with monoculture plantations, destabilizing regional/local ecologies and economies (Ostrom and Nagendra 2006). In various tribal and forested districts, in areas classed as reserved or protected forests, the different rungs of the forest bureaucracy operate as de facto sovereigns, imposing arbitrary penalties on local populations for transporting fuel wood, inciting forest fires, or doing cultivation, while acting also as contractors for forest wealth— floating tenders, awarding contracts and sanctioning development projects such as schools, dispensaries or small enterprises. For the inhabitants of so-called ‘forest villages’— habitations, unrecorded settlements and hamlets that fall within reserved forest boundaries, all welfare and developmental programs have to be sanctioned through the forest department, and continued harassment and immiseration are a way of life.

Conflicts between forest departments and local populations dependent on forests have steadily escalated, with protests against exploitative trade in forest produce, usurious money lending, bonded labor and land alienation, but also against displacement due to large dams and infrastructural projects, wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. With the intensification of neoliberal economic growth and the increasing privatization of natural resources and forest-rich areas are being treated as repositories of invaluable mineral wealth - bauxite, iron ore, dolomite, gold and coal. Interestingly, while extraction during the colonial era was interested in the commercial value of *forests*, in recent years, with the escalation of mining interests, it is forest *land* that has become increasingly valuable and vulnerable to diversion. Resistance to the penetration of corporations in ecologically fragile and socio-politically marginalized areas of the country has also grown, with communities like the Dongria Kondh in the Niyamgiri hills in Orissa protesting against the Vedanta aluminium refinery in a language that asserts the primordial attachment of community to land.

In the last fifteen years, the governments of the states of Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand have signed hundreds of ‘Memoranda of Understanding’ (MoUs) with national

and international corporations, signing away vast tracts of land and forest to set up mining quarries, refineries, processing plants and Special Economic Zones (Sundar 2016). This model of predatory industrialism has not only led to the decimation of fragile ecosystems, but also the dispossession and displacement of hundreds of millions of forest and land-dependent rural poor, most of them belonging to ‘adivasi,’ indigenous’ or scheduled tribal communities.

Resource struggles have sometimes deployed ‘democratic’ ‘non-violent,’ legal means, such as sit-ins, demonstrations, assemblies, public hearings, marches and rallies. On the other hand, Maoist (also known as Naxalite) guerrilla armies and cadres have launched their own underground protest operations, and taken over distinct swathes of forest in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, with the ambition not just of critiquing statist development models but the overthrow of state authority. Forests across India, commentators concur are ‘at war’ and ‘under siege’ (Roy 2011; Pandita 2011; Sundar 2016).

Globally, the degradation and loss of tropical forests worldwide has been emerging as a matter of grave concern in global environmental, scholarly and policy circles, particularly given their vital importance for arresting climate change (Dove 2003). With this, the question of how precisely anthropogenic activity impacts composition and quality of forests and the institutional arrangements best suited to govern forests has also emerged from the academic confines of economics and conservation science to be taken up by transnational environment protection organizations who now directly influence and advise national-level policy on matters relating to forest management and government²⁶ (Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Ostrom and Nagendra 2006). In India too, forests continue to be the center of highly charged

²⁶ In the recently concluded climate negotiations in Paris for instance, the Indian Prime Minister listed expanding the country’s forest cover as a key ecological commitment. “India committed to Paris Climate Change Accord, says PM Narendra Modi,” Business Standard, (June 3, 2017). http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-committed-to-paris-climate-change-accord-says-pm-narendra-modi-117060201555_1.html. Accessed August 20, 2017.

conflicts— the question of whether forests should be allowed to remain human-free, inviolate zones of ecological regeneration or whether they are spaces that have always been constituted in some measure by human and nonhuman activity and ‘interference,’ and to what extent such activity should be permitted or subject to control and regulation, has been a long-contested terrain (Pathak 1998). My intervention into this vast arena of scholarship is to clear some space to record the texture of daily experiences of resource-dependent peoples, and bring out their incremental, tentative efforts to secure some spaces in the midst of shifting legal and policy regimes.

Notes on Terrain and Method: An Invitation to Dindori and Samnapur

Dindori is one of the easternmost districts of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.



Fig. 2. Map of Madhya Pradesh.



Fig. 3. Dindori relative to Madhya Pradesh

Dindori is bounded by the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh along its south eastern border and flanked on three sides by the districts, Anuppur, Umaria, Jabalpur and Mandla

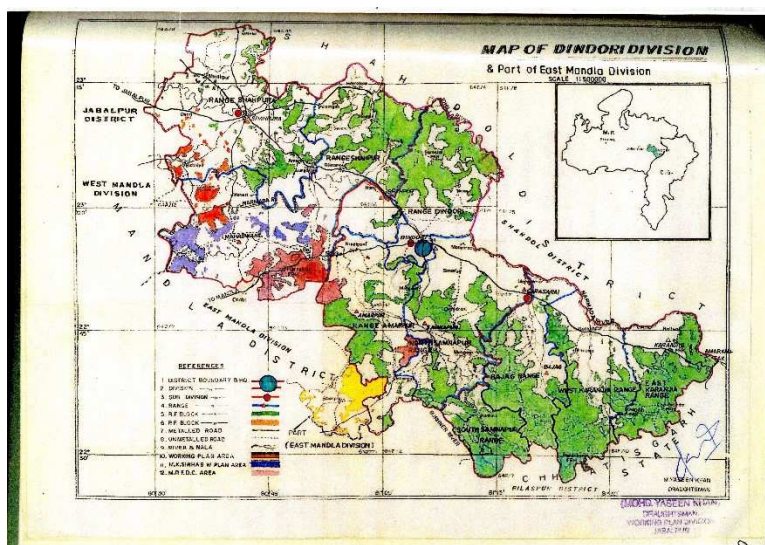


Fig. 4. Dindori district. Source: <http://www.dindori.nic.in>.

Specified as a 'Scheduled Area',²⁷ the district was formed out of the larger Mandla district in 1998, as a part of the wider reorganization of districts when the state of

²⁷ 'Scheduled Areas' specified under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, characterized by preponderance of tribal population; compacted and reasonable size of the area; underdeveloped nature of the district; marked disparity in economic status (www.tribal.nic.in). The president may notify a region or a district of a particular state as 'Scheduled'. The President may extend the area and also rescind Scheduled status from

Chhattisgarh came into being. The 2011 Census lists the population of the district as about 700,000, of which the most numerous were the three Scheduled Tribal groups Gond, Baiga and Kol. The 2011 census does not disaggregate by numbers by community, but the 2001 Census, which lists the total population for Dindori as 580,000 persons, enumerates Gonds at 297,000, Baigas at 33,000 and Kol adivasis at 25,000. In addition, 'Other Backward Castes' such as Ahirs, a pastoral caste, also resided in the area. I also met several families who pledged allegiance to the 'Kabir Panthi' sect of Sant Ravidas, and a small number of Dalit and Muslim individuals and families. Dindori was subdivided into seven further smaller administrative units called 'blocks' or 'tehsils' (Fig. 4). I found myself living in Samnapur tehsil, about 25 kilometers south of Dindori, where the Ekta Parishad headquarters were.

Ekta Parishad is a Gandhian 'social movement' working on land and forest rights for the rural poor, based in Bhopal, the state capital of Madhya Pradesh. Rather than concentrating its efforts in a single village or district as a social experiment modelling democratic citizenship and rural sustainability, as many well-known social movements have tended to do, EP had chosen a wider regional and national strategy of forming alliances with civil society groups, and had participated in public debates on key resource-related legislations such as the Land Acquisition Act and the Forest Rights Act. As Baviskar notes in the case of the activities of the Sangath in western Madhya Pradesh in the mid-late nineties, EP sustained a somewhat utopian vision of self-contained village economies based on sustainable local resource management and use, and had chosen a defiant, confrontational strategy with the local state wherever it was active. On a national scale, the leader of EP, Rajagopal, a veteran land rights activist, led innumerable *padyatras* (foot marches), across various districts of the country and forged alliances with other movements. For the activists

an area. They embody principles followed in declaring 'Excluded and 'Partially-Excluded Areas under the Government of India Act 1935, Schedule 'B of recommendations of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas Sub Committee of Constituent Assembly and the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission 1961.

who worked under him, Rajagopal was a saintly figure akin to Gandhi, and despite the many obstacles they encountered, they revered him and worked hard to ‘implement’ his vision for sustainable rural community in their respective fields.

When I arrived at the Gandhi Bhavan in Bhopal, which housed Ekta Parishad, I was greeted by Jill Carr-Harriss, Rajagopal’s kindly and intelligent partner, who oversaw the day-to-day business of running the organization. At the time I made their acquaintance in 2010, EP activists were involved in the logistics and planning for a massive *padyatra* from Bhopal to Delhi in 2012 — a journey of about 500 miles, whose participants were to be mainly rural farmers and wage workers. Ekta Parishad had a complex organizational structure, with regional coordinators in many states, who oversaw the group’s activities and mobilized communities in their districts. In the months of September and October 2010, I accompanied the senior activists on trips to villages in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, and sat in on many strategy sessions in which regional-level coordinators brought in updates on the situation in their regions.

Tasked with ensuring the participation of over a million people for the march, the activists were slightly daunted. They brought up their problems at the strategy meetings, held in public meeting halls in towns such as Jhansi. Rajagopal and his close team of ‘youth leaders’, mainly idealistic urban-based men and women who had left lucrative careers abroad and in cities, enraptured by Rajagopal’s vision for rural transformation, engaged with the problems brought in by regional activists, collectively brainstorming solutions. These tech-savvy youngsters, trained in management and leadership, were brought in to upgrade the movement’s activism to changing times and expand its urban reach and appeal, but in the mass village-level rallies that were held in villages, Rajaji’s message was strictly old-school: He would give rousing speeches about how the state and corporate capital were colluding to expropriate the resources of the poor, and how the poor must rise as one to challenge this

onslaught. He detailed their organization's plan for the 2012 march, exhorting his enthusiastic audience to participate in the midst of all their preoccupations with farming, labor and providing for their families.

Humbled by the commitment and passion displayed by activists at these meetings, but also unable to suspend the critical intuition that has troubled countless anthropologists who must engage the activists and practitioners whose politics they find problematic, I was keen to move to Dindori and begin my fieldwork. At one of the strategy sessions, I was introduced to Abhay and Meera,²⁸ the dynamic duo who oversaw Ekta Parishad's activities in the 'Mahakaushal' region, which was the name for the plateau forests in the upper reaches of the Narmada river valley in eastern Madhya Pradesh. Learning from Abhay and Meera that the right to forest access was the 'main livelihood issue' in the Dindori region, I quickly arranged to travel with them back to Mahakaushal. For the remainder of my fieldwork, I engaged little with Ekta Parishad's leadership or their activism, preferring to concentrate my inquiries locally. Meera became a close friend, confidante and fierce and challenging interlocutor — but while she would often leave Samnapur for Ekta Parishad rallies and meetings, my most engaging interactions with her remained grounded in the local life of Dindori.

In his work in Rajasthan, Bhrigupati Singh forwards the concept of 'waxing and waning life,' as useful for describing the temporal intensities of a range of things — a government scheme, for instance, an NGO program, for tracing the arc of a political affect, the career of a local god or the contours of a crisis (Singh 2015). When I entered the field, Ekta Parishad was a somewhat waning presence in the area. Its field-level staff were scattered and difficult to pin down, but in the course of my interviews with them, the more senior activists would hark back to the organizations hey day of rallies and marches, storming the

²⁸ Names of regional-level Ekta Parishad activists are pseudonyms. Rajagopal is a well-known land rights activist and public figure.

district Collectorate office, taking on forest officials, and encouraging villagers to occupy forest and revenue land for cultivation. Meera was a relative newcomer to the area, and was tasked with revivifying Ekta Parishad's following in the villages of Dindori. The initial months of my fieldwork were spent closely tailing her and other EP activists, sitting in on village meetings in which they held rousing speeches reminding villagers of their responsibilities to participate in the 2012 march. In strategy sessions with the five or six activists who divided up villages between themselves, Meera would reiterate Rajaji's message, that maximum participation had to be sought, pressing her staff to report on the progress they had made. Privately, she would vent her anxieties and sometimes her ire, to me, bemoaning the difficulties of the terrain, the conditions of impoverishment, the recalcitrance of EP's field level staff to her leadership. But she would quickly gather herself, making to-do lists, arranging events, meeting officials, making phonecalls to her home in Bilaspur and trying to find construction materials and labor for a small house she was building for herself in Samnapur.

Upon every departure for the field from Delhi, I would take a train to the dusty cantonment city of Jabalpur, and thence board one of the buses that travelled further and higher eastward along Madhya Pradesh State Highway Route 22, about 125 km toward the pilgrimage town of Amarkantak on the border with Chhattisgarh. A fast car or jeep could make the journey in about 3 hours, it usually took the buses about 6. Instead of going all the way to Amarkantak, I would disembark in the crowded peri-urban squalor of Dindori and board another bus that would take me instead to Samnapur, the scene of adventures.

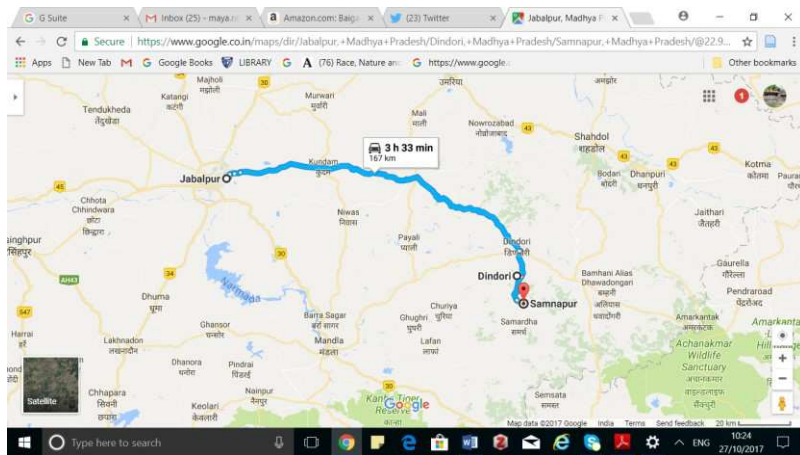


Fig. 5. Route from Jabalpur to Samnapur.

The 25 km from Dindori to Samnapur covered a mostly degraded and cleared landscape, extensively cultivated and densely settled. From Samnapur, I ventured further south and east, into more densely forested terrain, to explore the villages that I eventually settled in. The working plan document for Dindori (which comes within the Jabalpur division of forests) informs us that the region is covered with Moist Peninsular Sal forests of high quality. These forests are all mostly notified as reserved or protected forest. Pradip Krishen's meticulously researched and lushly illustrated field guide to the Jungle Trees of Central India is a far more useful guide, telling us that the forests of the central Indian region are characterized as dry or moist depending on their response to rainfall. The eastern uplands where I conducted fieldwork were a mixture of moist and mixed deciduous forest, with Sal as the dominant species. The 'jungles' of central India, Krishen suggests, can be thought of as 'relic fragments' rather than natural forest. "They have all been worked and coppiced, burnt and abused, and it is a miracle that they still survive at all" (Krishen 2013, 24). The forests, as mentioned, were extensively cleared, lurking at the borders of dense human settlements surrounded by fields of paddy, rye, wheat and chickpea. As one ventured further from administrative centers, settlements grew more sparse and further apart with more forest in between them.

The initial weeks of fieldwork were frustrating and I felt frequently overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of the task I had taken on. I was dependent on Ekta Parishad staff to take me around, the landscape felt unnavigable and strange. Transport was rickety, crowded and wildly unreliable. I was plunged into the thickets of NGO politics, land rights mobilization, love affairs, gossip and jealousy in Samnapur, a fierce local politics of caste, commensality and untouchability and the dizzying, exhausting task of negotiating life in a far flung rural, poor and ‘tribal’ area with no amenities like running water, electricity or internet. Any questions about nature and the human that I might have started out with receded further and further in the face of the exigencies of survival. Life became about navigating sensitive social relationships with the staff of Ekta Parishad and finding a place to live where I wouldn’t be so much in their way. The repetitive meals of salty dal, locally grown ‘red rice’ and bitter greens, generously prepared and shared by my hosts, wore on my taste buds and I would sneak away once a week to Dindori to taste the familiar flavors of mutter paneer, potato cauliflower curry and naan, at the lone hotel that catered to visiting officials. An obliging local lad helped me daily transport buckets of water from the communal hand pump to my room, and I waited to catch the four hours of electricity in the morning and evening when I could charge my laptop and wait breathlessly for my email to load. I cursed myself several times for having come so far out in search of an ‘authentic’ fieldwork experience, an entire space-time away from modern urban comforts and familiar academic and social worlds where I had talked loftily with peers and teachers about poverty, ethics, politics, nature, and the ‘tribal and forest question.’ Feeling a fervent, somatic kinship with other anthropologists who had gone chasing abstract questions in locales remote from global, national and regional centers of power and access, only to be aggrieved that they had little to do with the everyday concerns of people, I settled down to the only task that seemed to justify such an ordeal — taking detailed notes of impressions, conversations and encounters.

As I became acclimatized however, these predicaments were overlaid by another film of anxieties and doubts. Which was an appropriate ‘field village’ for my studies, and how would I travel there, and live there? What criteria should guide my selection? From what I had seen, people’s relationships to their neighboring forests seemed quite disenchanted, limited to a few mandatory daily trips to gather fuel wood and other necessities. Meera, my friend and mentor from Ekta Parishad, took pity on me. “Do your fieldwork in Madagaur,” she said. “It is surrounded by forest on three sides, has a significant Baiga population, and is close enough to Samnapur that you won’t feel too stuck. You can always walk the six kilometers to Manikpur and a bus will pick you up from there. It is an ‘Ekta Parishad village’, the residents are reliable, trustworthy and longtime loyalists of Rajaji”.

Madagaur did, indeed, turn out felicitous for extended stays, and for much of the next two years, I based myself there while going back and forth from Samnapur and travelling to other villages and hamlets. In Madagaur, I stayed in the Baiga hamlet with Sukhram and his family, who comprised his wife and four children, and his aged parents. The choice of hamlet more or less decided my study, for I was looked on as a strange commodity by the Gonds and Ahirs in the village, who were friendly enough but gave me a wide berth. The Baiga neighbourhood, of which there were three, comprised about ten households set in a close cluster. I interacted closely with three of the families, sleeping alternately in each family’s home, eating meals wherever I happened to be invited, and accompanying men and women on their daily chores in the fields, in the forests, and on errands to the nearby market town of Manikpur or Samnapur. Tuesdays were market days, and people generally made their way to the bustling Manikpur to collect rations of fair price grain, negotiate with the patwari or land records official, take out loans from the sahuakar, or conduct other official or market business. Wednesdays were days when Baiga women from the village collected to walk three hours to Bamhni market to sell the firewood they had gathered during the week. I accompanied

women from the Baigan tola, as the Baiga neighborhoods in villages were called, on several such trips, to gather and sell forest produce, and the composite impressions from these walks have coalesced into the very **first chapter** of this dissertation — ‘Perceiving the Forest: Movement and Form in the Practice of Subsistence’. This chapter describes accompanying women on their daily excursions to forests and markets to gather, process and sell forest produce. Moving through the forest is seen to yield a mode of sensory knowing, and perception itself comes to be shared and distributed among a collective. The gathering of ‘nontimber’ forest produce (NTFP) has generally been described in the literature as an under-remunerated form of gendered labour carried out under conditions of extreme precarity. While acknowledging this reality of NTFP gathering, this chapter also attempts to see forest gathering as a dense sensory experience embodied in rural women’s walking practices. The chapter challenges the picture of walking emblemized in much western social theory as an inherently male, solitary, perambulatory exercise by following women through the collective tasks of walking, felling, picking, pruning, tying and carrying. This chapter attempts to shift the imagination of how ‘forest-dwelling’ communities relate to the environments of their subsistence by providing a ‘thick description’ of the minutiae of everyday experience. Thus, the chapter takes literally the question of ‘putting pressure on forests’ by asking now just how humans leave imprints on the surfaces of the forest, but also how the forest registers or impresses itself upon the bodies and lives of the humans who live in its surrounds.

The **second chapter**, titled ‘Fluid Land: Encroachment, Possession and Property in the Forest Fringes,’ still located in Madagaur, deals with the praxis of land-making. Specifically, the chapter narrates the progression of a land dispute between villagers over an ambiguously demarcated plot of land lying between agricultural fields and forestlands. These lands are small clearings on the forest slope, intermittently cultivated by villagers whose titled holdings are insufficient to subsist on. Similar to the *nevad* fields of Baivskar’s

description, they are encroachments, and therefore, constantly vulnerable to being repossessed by the forest department or by rival village claimants if left untended for too long. The chapter argues that the physical and categorical fluidity of encroached-upon lands enables rival claimants to forward different ‘rationales of ownership’ that rely on intimate knowledge of histories of land ownership and neighbourly relations and transactions, showing how land constitutes persons as social and ‘*dividual*’ (Strathern 1988, 275). This mode of conceiving sociality as fungible and fluid, confounds activist conceptions of the significance of land or zameen in the lives of villagers and the picture of what action they should take in the face of dispossession. The chapter distinguishes possession from property, considering everyday modes of claiming space such as putting up fences, planting crops, as well as more ephemeral actions such as looking, pointing, and simply saying, “This is mine,” thus pressuring liberal doctrines of property as an unambiguous relationship of appropriation and self-ownership.

The **third chapter** moves to consider how the past lives in the present, by exploring the colonial antecedents of contemporary projects of *improvement* of lives and landscapes. The chapter provides an overview of historical accounts of the creation of the ‘Baigachak’ or Baiga reserve in the late nineteenth century, an agrarian reformatory to reform recalcitrant ‘wild’ shifting cultivators like the Baiga. The chapter argues that a governmental logic of improvement was at stake in resettling the Baiga into sedentary cultivation, which produced the Baiga as a forest-dwelling tribe bound to the state of unruly nature, juxtaposing them against the Gond as industrious cultivators who could be reformed into cultured peasants. Thus, the chapter examines improvement as a technology of power that produces, systematizes distinctions between nature (that which is to be overcome and improved), and culture as the horizon of domesticated, agrarian citizenship. The chapter further argues that such logics are discernible in the contemporary landscape of Dindori, such as when Gond and

Baiga neighbors are casually assessed by agents of welfare and development as more or less ‘civilized’, based on their readiness to adapt and adopt improved farming technologies.

The **fourth and final chapter** describes the different ways in which villagers address the state and invoke the law in defending their claims to forests. Looking at instances of conflict as well as cooperation between villagers, forest officials and local administrators, the chapter develops the argument that the resource struggles of the rural poor can be thought of as *moral claims* to citizenship that appeal to the state and law to preserve life, broadly conceived, rather than to a body of rules and norms. Through interviews and conversations with forest officials, NGO activists and journalists local to the area, the chapter also explores how the Baiga come to be seen as the ‘prickly subjects’ of rights and recognition – forest-dwellers whose incursions into forests have to be reluctantly acknowledged and accommodated.

Much of the material for this dissertation was itself gathered in the course of immersive ‘dwelling’ in the villages, forests, tea shops, government offices and NGO offices, marches, meetings and rallies, and much of my learning happened while moving between these sites. In the village itself, I conducted twenty household surveys in two Baiga hamlets, which gave me some preliminary insight into some basic demographic details such as household size, extent of landholdings, assets, livestock, schooling levels, and villagers’ own account of their use of neighboring forests. Semi-structured interviews with the schoolteacher, Panchayat record-keeper, the unpopular head of the village Forest Protection Committee and the Aaganwadi worker turned into long conversations that supplied useful information about village history, settlement patterns and longstanding affinities and animosities between communities. I held detailed interviews with four of the seven activists of Ekta Parishad, trying especially with the senior activists to get them to reminisce about the early days of EP’s activities in the region. Much of my understanding of EP’s land rights

activism came from conversations with Meera, in whose home I was a frequent visitor. In addition, I made repeat visits to the District Collectorate office where *Jan Sunvais* (public hearings) would be held every week to hear people's grievances and concerns.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, in the latter part of 2012, as I became more confident navigating the landscape on my own, I spent more time in the villages of southern Samnapur, which were further away and harder to navigate through dense forest. Many of these excursions took place with Balwant Rahangdale, the charismatic coordinator for an NGO called National Institute of Women, Child and Youth Development, headquartered in Nagpur. A fund of information about the Baigachak history and regional political ecology, I tried to record as many of our conversations as possible, while we travelled on his motorbike.

A note on the archive: This being first and foremost an ethnographic study, observation and participation over an extended period of time in a particular form of life has been the most productive archive. That said, archival materials such as village demographic data, recent land records for Madagaur and regional newspaper clippings pertaining to land and forest issues in Mandla, Dindori and Jabalpur have been collected. Chapter 3, which uses historical material, consults two colonial archival sources on the Central Provinces— the Mandla Land Revenue Settlement of 1870 and the Forest Settlement Report for 1866— as instances of the rationale of improvement that drove the creation of the Baiga reserve in the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 1

Perceiving the Forest: Movement and Form in the Practice of Subsistence

Gopal and I stumbled along the pitch-dark forest path, making our way from the wedding revelry in Bona to his home village of Madagaur. The route illuminated only by a thin ray of flashlight, I jumped nervously at every scurrying or shuffling sound. Gopal walked along blithely, wheeling his bicycle. Soon enough, we did hear a growl that sounded very real, and Gopal stopped in his tracks. ‘It’s a bear’, he said, much to my terror. Quickly, he pulled out some paper from my bag, stuck it in the spokes of the front and back wheels of his bicycle, so that it would make a loud fluttering noise, like a motorized vehicle. He pulled out a small whistle, which he said he carried around at night in the forest. Making me perch in front of him on the bar of the bike and hold aloft the flashlight, while he stuck the whistle between his teeth, we hurtled along to safety, a strange rattling, fluttering, whistling contraption combined in an unrecognizable sonic combination.

Two humans on a bicycle, we had to outwit the forest creatures of the night, convincing them that we were not prey. In order to do that, we had to traverse the forest as some non-specific, other-than-human creature that was defined by sound, more than any kind of physical form, or rather, sound here served as an index of physical form (Feld 2015, 12). The renowned ethnomusicologist, Steven Feld, defines ‘acoustemology’ as conjoining “acoustics” and “epistemology,” ‘to theorize sound as a way of knowing’ (Feld 2015, 12). Knowing here is relational - a ‘knowing with’ and ‘knowing-through,’ the audible. Through his longtime study situating sound in social fields, Feld aligns modes of sensory knowing to theories of relational ontology. Relational ontology is the problematic of whether the world is constituted of different kinds of substantial essences that are then named as ‘human’, ‘animal’, ‘plant’, ‘material’ or ‘technology’, or by relatedness, ‘conjunctions, disjunctions and entanglements among all copresent and historically accumulated forms’ (Feld 2015, 13). Relational ontology is of course a central question animating current thinking on nature-culture relations, aligned to posthumanist approaches that attempt to radically decenter human presence and action amidst environmental (and technological) others.

In this chapter, I dwell on ordinary scenes of traversing and navigating the forest to try and understand forms of perception, selfhood and relatedness emergent in the course of sensory engagements with environments of subsistence. I focus particularly on women's daily forest gathering activities that call forth an embodied attention with one's immediate surroundings. Unlike recent ontologically driven understandings of human-non-human relationships that attempt to theorize socialities beyond the human, the descriptions contained in this chapter, like the opening vignette, explore more modest forms of shared 'creaturely life,' in which a sense of one's humanness is retained and transcended more fluidly, without necessarily raising any problems of a communication gap across ontological difference. I contend that these scenes disclose a somewhat different picture of the mutual absorption of the natural and the social, of what it is to subsist as human in the vicinity of a forest.

Women's forest work has most often been looked at from the point of view of low-skill, poorly remunerated, feminine labor, crucial for sustaining the bare minimum nutritional and financial requirements of the impoverished tribal family unit. The surveys on forest use and dependence that I conducted in the Baiga hamlet of Madagaur village confirm the importance of forest produce in supplementing the food and cash needs of families, especially in the rainy season. In keeping with the question I raised in the introduction, however, as to whether impoverishment precludes a creative relationship to the environments of subsistence, this chapter treats tribal women's gathering practices instead as dense, rich, social and sensory experiences in which the 'perception of the environment' is distributed in collective task-oriented doing, rather than lodged in a single perceiving subject. The forest itself is encountered as a sensuous surface in the course of moving and feeling one's way about in it, and skill reveals itself as a mode of sensory knowing that is 'regrown' in the shared, repeated work of generations rather than as a repository of information transmitted across generations. (Ingold 2001, 321).

The ethnography tries to capture the presence of the forest in village life, in the context of the rhythms and tempos of its daily routines— cooking, cleaning, visiting, and of course, gathering forest produce. Attending closely to the bodily dispositions and kinds of talk that accompany the work of gathering, and to the movements of materials and people between the forest, home and market, the forest is experienced simultaneously as one's own, and imminently alienable. What is it to carry on a human form of life or sociality, in the vicinity of a forest that is perceived to be rapidly diminishing or receding?

Forests and Anthropology

Forests have for long served almost as default sites for understandings of how the natural world shapes human societies. The Amazonian rainforest, with its dense web of ecological connections and cosmological elaborations has provided anthropologists with a rich critical vocabulary to theorize socialities beyond the human. Claude Levi-Straus noted that the tropical forest is perhaps the only environment that affords the possibility to grant idiosyncratic characteristics to each member of a species (Levi-Strauss 1966, 161-217). This picture of 'nature' as the other of human sociality, with an independent existence accessible as a resource for material as well as cultural survival, has influenced several years of scholarship of the nature-society interface in different regions of the world²⁹. In 'The Savage Mind,' Levi-Strauss deploys the complexity of ecological linkages between life forms in Amazonian forests to argue that human perception is organized along universal cognitive schemas that stabilize or order the disarray of experience into series of structural oppositions

²⁹ Some South Asian examples that stand out are Nurit Bird-David's studies of 'The Giving Environment', in which she argues that the ethos of 'sharing' among households of the Nayaka community in the Nilgiris is the direct result of a shared conception of the forest as a 'giving ancestor' (Bird-David 1990, 1999). More recently, Annu Jalais' rich and detailed study of the Sunderbans somewhat uncritically applies Descola's approach of 'cultural constructions of nature' to understand the complex interchange between kinship, symbolic life and subsistence practice (Jalais 2014).

(Levi-Strauss 1966). For Levi-Strauss, relatedness to the components of one's physical environment is conceived as a set of conceptions homologous or analogous to social relationships. Thus, human beings relate to their environments by means of mental representations and the physical world is, in turn, a materialization of these mental structures. The relationship between mind and world orders both social and natural worlds, and human intention, embodiment and practice receive no place in this picture. Turner (2009) argues that the late 1960s saw a 'crisis in late structuralism in France' and a waning of the influence of the structuralist project, with greater emphasis on social action, subjective agency and the explicit emergence of disciplinary concerns with human interactions with non-human agents and environments (Turner 2009: 8). Levi-Strauss' structuralist project was both challenged and carried forward in different directions by Philippe Descola's work on animism and Eduardo Viveiros de Castros' on perspectivism, both of whom bring back the question of relatedness across ontological domains more centrally into their understanding of perceptual schemas (Descola 2013, Viveiros de Castro 1998). In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Descola argues that depending on the lines along which similarities and differences perceived between human societies and natural worlds were ordered, and according to where societies fell on these continuums, they could be grouped as animistic, naturalistic, totemistic, and analogistic (Descola 2013, 92). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro inverts the Levi-Straussian relationship between nature and culture by arguing that what is universal is not nature (which, for Levi-Strauss includes the mind), rather that Amerindian ontologies recognize just one universal culture, that of the human, and multiple natures that have the capacity for interiority and subjectivity variably distributed amongst them in an unequal ecology of predator-prey relationships. De Castro thus replaces multiculturalism with a *multinaturalism* (Viveiros de Castro 1998). The idea here is that humans retain a sense of themselves and other non-humans as equally enmeshed in a web of relations, and in order for these relationships to be

elaborated in such complex circuits of analogy or homology, there has to be the sense that the interiority of other beings is accessible in some way. This is only possible if all beings are thought to have selves of a similar kind, even though their ‘species-specific umwelt’ might be vastly different. This idea receives cosmological elaboration in the conception, common across distinct Amazonian and Amerindian communities, that different beings have the same soul essence, only different outer coverings. Descola notes that in contrast with modern dualist perspectives that see humans and nonhumans distributed in two quite distinct ontological domains, Amazonian cosmologies treat the discontinuities between humans, animals and plants as ‘mere differences of degree not of kind’ (Descola 2014, 22).

If the so-called ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology can be said to have liberated human-nature interactions from its human-centric bias, it has also been critiqued as being ‘just another word for culture’ (Carrithers et al. 2010). That is, ontological perspectivism required radical alterity from western naturalism in order to sustain itself. No matter how sophisticated the theorizing of Amerindian cosmologies as vehicles for the radical unseating of culture as an exclusively human preserve, and instead as forged relationally and intersubjectively with nonhumans, they are still, human elaborations, available in rich detail from human interpretants. The interiority of a bat, as Thomas Nagel famously argued, remains unavailable to us humans (Nagel 1974). This problem of a residual humanism, that we remain bound in human worldviews while trying to extend understandings of sociality to encompass the non-human, continues to haunt anthropologists.

Eduardo Kohn’s recent and justly famous ethnography, ‘How Forests Think,’ goes a long way in radicalizing perspectivism in the sense of not containing it within a humanist or even posthumanist framework (Kohn 2013). Kohn argues that the web of relations sustained in the Equadorian forests call for a mode of analysis that is radically *a*human. (xx). The forest, Kohn argues, amplifies life process as a kind of semiosis, where communication is not

restricted to symbolic or linguistic communication. If we think with and in signs, especially a sign as defined by semiotician Pierce: “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (quoted in Kohn 2013, 29), then all manner of beings/things can be said to be participating in a process of non-representational interchange. A sign, in the Pierce-ian framework, is something which represents or signifies an *object* to some *interpretant* (Pierce 1932; Burks 1949). The interpretant need not be human, and symbolic representation need not be the sole preserve of the human. Anything then can be a self in that it is a locus of ‘aboutness’. Drawing thought away from the Saussurean picture of sign systems as confined to human language opens up ‘representation’ ‘as something more general and more widely distributed than human language’ (Kohn 2013, 38). The Pierceian sign system at its most basic, is comprised of three kinds of signs— iconic, indexical and symbolic. Iconic signs work by resemblance, that is, an icon comes to stand in for its object in as much as it is an image of the object that it represents. An icon can also be a sound image. Consider, for instance this small moment from my own fieldwork: Sometimes, I would wake from my sleep with a start, and leap out of the cot in which I normally slept. Phulwati, my host, would say, with a startled expression, “Mayawati, how quickly you get up! *Luuuuuuunnnng!!*” As a sonic image of ‘how an action unfolds in the world’, the expression was immediately intelligible as meaning “to spring out of bed”. Kohn’s ethnography is full of moments like this - the sonic image of a pig falling into the water, or a monkey being startled out of its perch by a crashing log. An icon is commonly understood to represent what it is ‘about’ by a play of resemblances, the simultaneous recognition of similarities and differences; however, as Kohn observes, an icon works precisely in as much as these similarities and differences *do not matter* (2013, 207-208). That is, iconic signs work by virtue of a certain inattention. An indexical sign on the other hand, is one that points to directly to something else— while icons are based on physical resemblance, a standing in of

something for something else through resemblance made possible by a play of similarity and difference, an indexical sign works directly, by being in an existential relationship with its object (Burk 1949). An indexical sign points directly to its object, incorporating dimensions of both space and time. Kohn gives the example of a monkey being startled out of its perch by a crashing tree; the crash signals something real that is about to happen, a possibly dangerous situation. An index points to such 'absent futures, they encourage us to form connections between what is happening and what might potentially happen' (Kohn 2013, 33). While icons represent by resemblance, indices represent by virtue of 'real connections' that they sustain with what they represent. The third kind of sign, according to Pierce, is the symbol. The symbol is the most linguistic and conventional, and therefore the most human, of all the signs. It works (acquires meaning, becomes intelligible, stands for something to someone/something) by virtue of its relationship to other symbols in a semiotic system. By showing how these different forms of the sign are nested within each other in the life processes of the part of the Amazon that the Runa inhabit, Kohn argues that signs are of life as much as they belong to the domain of thought and language. In fact, thought and life are not separate, they are both simultaneously realized in semiotic processes. When a being can be said to be alive, it can be said to be thinking. Any life form that has a quality of 'aboutness,' that is, can stand for something in respect to something else, can also be said to be a 'self', and participating in a process of life and of thought. Such a picture of thought, 'the living thought', Kohn calls it, is vastly different from the Cartersian picture of thought as a mind bound by human form.

Two things in Kohn's work strike me as relevant for my own argument, springing as it does, from life in a very different forested part of the world. First, the title of Kohn's book, 'How Forests Think' itself works as a kind of sign in what it draws attention to, and draws attention away from. With the title itself, Kohn draws us towards a domain of alterity where

forests do something as radical as thinking, and yet away from the question of what makes a place a forest in the first place. What complex material-discursive, historic and political processes, patterns and regularities of intervention, interference, study, and lived practice, make a forest a ‘forest’? Clearly, the Runa inhabit a complex ecological niche with a multitude of other species, but what makes this niche a forest? The part of Kohn’s answer that is the most convincing is actually quite conventionally anthropocentric— the Runa, first and foremost, see themselves as living in a forest. But in order to be able to (see themselves as) living in a forest, they see the forest as a domestic space (likened to the ranches of the spirit masters). The spirit masters of the forest are like their former colonial overlords, and the Runa are the domestic animals of these spirit masters/colonial overlords. They themselves can become or embody the perspective of the spirit masters through the proper shamanic channels (In the context of an actual encounter, if you are not a ‘master’ or ‘predator’ you stand a very real chance of becoming prey). The Runa of Avila are also seen by other communities of the upper Amazon, and by inhabitants of the market town of Loreto as belonging to the ecology of the forest. So, there is the world of the forest and a world that is quite separate (the world of politicians and NGOs and loggers and contractors and botanists). As Kohn himself notes, ‘Avila..has always been part of larger political economies at the same time that it has been fully immersed in the forest’s ecology of selves’ (Kohn 2013, 138). But his claim is that when the Runa step into the forest, they are stepping into a particular world of possibilities (a world of proliferating forms and futures) (Kohn 2013, 183, 207), and it is this world that is the preoccupation of this ethnography. Some scholars have found grounds for critique here— in a stinging indictment of the ontological project, Lucas Bessire and David Bond argue that ‘ontological anthropology defers thorny questions of historical specificity, the social afterlives of anthropological knowledge, and the kinds of difference that are allowed to matter’ (Bessire and Bond 2014). They further argue that it is less

important to dismantle the nature-culture divide epistemologically than to recognize how these categories are permitted to solidify and endure as ‘political technologies’ of control and management of human and non-human populations’ (Bessire and Bond 2014, 2). In this chapter, I try to show that conceptualizing how people inhabit nature need not necessarily sideline questions of power and management; traces of state and market are everywhere in people’s everyday interactions with the forest— they are both incorporated into people’s understandings of their place in a landscape and simultaneously, strange to the everyday ‘ecology of selves’ that come together in the forest space. In the last two chapters of the dissertation, I explore what Bessire and Bond call ‘the afterlives of anthropological knowledge’ and how nature is made to matter in the control and management of populations.

In a more sympathetic reading, Philippe Descola argues that Kohn’s semiotic approach works for the particular forest milieu that he applies it to, but weakens precisely where it starts to posit itself as a more universalist explanation of how beings communicate. Descola argues that, though Kohn’s perspective on representation and aboutness and criteria for selfhood is very persuasive, it ultimately, is not really able to answer the question of how beings relate despite and across their ‘species-specific umwelt’ (von Uexküll 2010; Descola 2013).

The second analytic possibility opened up by Kohn has to do with the main contention of his book— that the world is set in motion and held in place as form by the work of signifying processes, that semiotic processes are, in themselves, a kind of a worlding. This picture of life as a kind of semiotic chain seems to imply that when one link in the chain doesn’t work, a sort of panic sets in, the familiar world dislodges itself a little bit. And conversely, any sense of being disjointed with the world is experienced first as a kind of

somatic panic. In the chapter titled ‘Trans-Species Pidgins’³⁰, an ‘epistemological crisis’ is precipitated when a pack of household dogs fail, through their dreams, to augur their own deaths by a forest predator. What Kohn calls an epistemological crisis, we might call a moment of skeptical doubt, when people begin to wonder about the contours of their known world. If they couldn’t correctly interpret their dogs’ cries, who couldn’t correctly foretell their own deaths as they should have been able to, then what can anybody know? The particular place of dogs in human and beyond-human sociality means that their ‘language’ (barks, whimpers and howls) is knowable and their dreams have significance and can be interpreted. To not interpret dreams correctly, as signs, can have life-and-death consequences: for instance, it can result in not timing a hunt properly, and falling prey to the jaguars and spirit masters of the forest. To put it simply, if, in a world full of meaningfulness, with signs constantly working at full capacity, if something fails, then the intelligibility of this world itself comes into question. This picture leaves little room for attention to ‘ordinary affects’ (Stewart) such as, say, worry, distractedness, fear or confusion, when encountering something strange or out of the usual in the familiar scheme of things.

When Gopal and I encountered what was quite possibly a nighttime predator, we did what we had to do to acknowledge the alterity of this unseen being and make a quick getaway. This required us to convince the predator that we were not prey, and in the moment of doing so, we were both human and not-quite human, but nowhere in this improvisation was there any cosmological bricolage handy to explain this interspecies encounter. On another occasion, as I walked slowly along the cowdung-splattered road leading up to the village, I encountered Rumavati, squatting on the side of the road, but turned towards the steep upward slope that led into the forest. “What are you waiting for?” I asked. “My goats to

³⁰ Published earlier as “How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the politics of transspecies Engagements.” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (February, 2007): 3-24.

come home” she said, not looking at me. “I just have to be here waiting for them, till they decide its time to come home. Then count them. It’s a daily worry”. Rumavati was worried about wild pigs or poisonous rats or even bears that sometimes attacked goats. The alterity and unpredictability of nonhuman behavior was absorbed in the course of things, in a resigned fashion, provoking worry, but not skeptical doubt of any kind.

These moments of slippage, when humans become or have to account for, something other than human in the course of navigating everyday landscapes of subsistence, is also of interest to another anthropologist, Tim Ingold. Like Viveiros de Castro and Descola, Ingold too asks how the Western scientific inheritance of a clear epistemological and ontological divide between the social and natural worlds has inflected social science, such that western ‘naturalism’ is held to be the only valid worldview, while nonwestern ‘cultures’ ‘construct’ various views of ‘nature’. These can count by way of so many distinct representations of the world, but they cannot unseat the perspective of western reason. Conversely, anthropology as a discipline, Ingold muses, sets up a false dichotomy between the biological and social life of humans, delimiting for itself as its subject matter, the social, relational aspect of human existence relinquishing the organismic, biogenetic aspects of life and form to the natural sciences.

According to Ingold, there should be a way of synthesizing what he feels are inseparable elements of human life, the biogenetic, organismic aspect, and the social/relational component. This remains a puzzle in his work, and later on in this chapter, I discuss the effectiveness of the idea of the hyphenated ‘organism-person’ that he proposes as a way out of this dichotomy. There are limitations to Ingold’s approach, but the attentiveness to what emerges in the course of quotidian immersion in one’s surroundings is helpful in describing the texture of experiences that I encountered amongst the forests and forest-dwellers of my acquaintance. In the more prosaic, managed, and sparse tropical forests of

central India, one might be inside or in the presence of a forest or contemplate it in a myriad ways, without necessarily invoking a world that is contained or distinct from a ‘non-forest’. For the Baiga villagers of Madagaur who lived in a hamlet at the very edge of the village and next to the forest, the forest was an everyday, go-to place for daily necessities, and sometimes an object of contemplation. Its ‘availability,’ that the opening vignette of the dissertation tries to capture, was sometimes through its ‘things’ or parts of things, sometimes through encounters, real and imagined, but most often in feeling one’s way around it to gather subsistence items.

Other ethnographies in the South Asian context have attempted to discuss how humans inhabit relations of proximity and enmeshment with nature and nonhumans/ especially forests. Annu Jalais’ work in the Sunderban forests of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, for instance, describes a cosmology of tiger-forest-human relationships that orders human kin relations, community dynamics, structures the ethos of forest work and explains relationships with the state (Jalais 2014). Bonbibí, the egalitarian goddess of the forest, is contrasted to the Brahmin-demon Dokkhin Rai, also the patron of the tiger, who, in his greed, appropriates the forest from humans. Bonbibí, sent by Allah to vanquish Dokkhin Rai and equalize relations in the forest, is an explicitly Islamic figure, the rescuer of the marginalized forest fishers. Accordingly, forest fishers describe the takings from their forest work as minimal, non-invasive and shared with tigers and other forest beings. The egalitarian ethos of the forest is contrasted to the hierarchical culture associated with land, mostly owned by relatively wealthy, Hindu commercial prawn cultivators. When tiger protection becomes a national conservation priority, islanders bemoan their neglect and oppression, experiencing themselves as ‘tiger-food’, prey at the hands of both state and tiger. In Jalais’ painstaking and detailed ethnography of the deltaic Sunderbans, despite what islanders describe as the

‘harshness’ of the environment, myth and religion are closely aligned, and available as resources that directly order everyday life and relationships.

If cosmology orders social relationships in Jalais’ study, the forest imagined as a ‘giving environment’ is a ‘local economic model’ of sharing resources among the Nayaka hunter-gatherers of the Nilgiri hills in Southern India (Bird-David 1990; 1999). ‘Giving’ functions, according to Bird-David as a ‘root metaphor’ that is it both springs from the entwinement of social and natural life, and orders their relationships. For the Nayaka the forest is as a parent and gives without any expectation of a return. Giving means something quite specific in Nayaka social life, distinct from the gift which carried with it the obligation to receive and reciprocate. Giving on the other hand, simply means that people believe that others should give when they (the first party) are in need. As the Nayaka imagine themselves in a relationship of kinship (sons, daughters) with the forest, so also they are in a sibling relationship with those who share residence in the hamlet. Giving without expectation of a return, and the expectation that other people will also give, structures both everyday social relations and the distribution of resources in the Nayaka community that Bird-David studies. This is in contrast to neighboring agricultural communities, in which the imagination of nature is that of ancestors, wherein nature will provide only if appropriately propitiated in the form of reverence and gift-offerings to ancestors. Resource distribution in these communities is governed by gift-giving and reciprocity (the obligation to repay), rather than giving and sharing, as among the Nayaka. The same spirits who are imagined in Nayaka society as parents, are imagined in proximate agrarian groups as ancestors.

The cultural affordances of the forest that I discuss in this chapter are somewhat different. Rather than offering a stable cosmological reference point for local, forest-dependent peoples, the forest was a go-to place for everyday necessities, to traverse while visiting relatives or en route to the market, or where festivals and celebrations were held. The

forest or *dongar* was where villagers routinely disappeared to, without reason. The forest was an unobtrusive but necessary physical presence in everyday life— sometimes remarked upon and the object of contemplation, at other times forgotten. The appearance of the physical forest itself was sparse and brown in the summer, and lush and overgrown in the monsoon. Apart from the listless observation that ‘the state has cut down this whole forest, there is hardly anything left for us’, villagers’ reflections offered little specificity of any remembered time when the forest was either especially plentiful or impoverished³¹. They talked about the state’s appropriation of specific plants - amla (gooseberry), mahua and tendu, the most commercially valuable forest products, of themselves logging sal trees and loading the forest department trucks. Dadi, Sukhram’s father, once showed me a clodful of dark clayey soil that he had tied in his dhoti. This soil, *chuhi mitti*, he called it, an excellent binder in construction, was once plentifully available in parts of the forest, had now all but disappeared, mined and taken away by the truckful, by forest officials. Apart from these sparse recollections, the disappearance of the forest as a ‘whole’ (in terms of state-led deforestation and loss of access through enclosure) was occasionally contemplated with consternation and worry, but also often forgotten amidst daily preoccupations with food provisioning, money scarcity, government schemes, and children’s education. For all its sparseness, the forest, as Phulwati stated aptly, was ‘there’ and it is to an ethnography of immersive engagement with this ‘there’-ness, this presence that I now turn.

³¹ For a contrasting account cite Ann Gold and Bhargupati Singh, both of whose fieldwork in Rajasthan describe quite specific memories, accounts and reasons for forest decline (Gold and Gujar 2002; Singh 2015).

The people-forest debate in India: beyond the sustainability question?

In the context of India, the debate around degradation of forests in the face of anthropogenic pressures arising from local use has been a longstanding one. There is a significant overlap between the country's land area covered by forests, and so-called 'tribal' areas, districts covered under centrally allocated schemes for tribal areas, such as the Integrated Tribal Development Program. While 60 percent of the country's forest area falls within 'tribal' districts, the majority of districts with greater than 67 percent forest cover are tribal (see Tribal Committee Report 2014, p. 49). Estimates from participatory forest management studies put the statistics of people dependent on forests for their everyday fuel, biomass and food needs, and for grazing and cropland at 60 million, a vast majority in the mixed forests of central India, spanning Bihar in the east to Gujarat in the West (Poffenberger and McGean 1998; TRC 2014, 48). The pressures on natural forests, wildlife, and forest-dependent communities from timber extraction, commercial industry, mining, and state-led development and infrastructure projects have also accelerated in the neoliberal era (Dreze, Samson and Singh 1997; Fernandes 2008; Lele and Menon 2014). The extent to which deforestation can be attributed to anthropogenic pressures resulting from overharvesting, overgrazing and other forms of local use, and from commercial logging, mining, development projects and plantation forests, is hotly debated (Gibson, McKean and Ostrom 2000; Rangarajan and Saberwal 2005; Ostrom and Nagendra 2006). One view has it that extreme poverty inevitably leads to unsustainable environmental use (Milne 2006), while other scholars argue that livelihood dependence on scarce ecological resources leads to their conservation and sustainable use (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, 2002; Guha 2000; Peet and Watts 2004). Yet another perspective has it that resource-dependent populations are 'natural conservationists' who, through long-term use and inhabitation of surrounding ecosystems have arrived at an optimal balance of use and conservation (Shiva 2014). What institutional

arrangements, including co-management and tenurial arrangements are best suited to ‘sustainable’ forest governance? (Ostrom and Agrawal 2001; Agrawal 2007). Is fortress conservation, the fencing of pristine wildlife areas as inviolate, the optimal solution? Or should people who have long inhabited forests and their fringes enjoy unfettered rights of access and use to the forests of their neighborhood? In India, these debates have polarized ecologists and conservation groups who would favor the eviction and resettlement of communities settled in or near forests, especially wildlife parks and sanctuaries (Thapar 1997) and others who see forest ecosystems as always having been shaped by human and non-human activity and disturbance (Saberwal, Gibbs and Chellam 1994; Rangarajan and Saberwal 2005; Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006; Lele and Menon 2014). Recent, critical interdisciplinary studies of tropical forest ecosystems have powerfully challenged catastrophic narratives of global forest decline, calling for detailed, case-specific analyses of the complex ways in which local communities have historically manipulated their surrounding ecosystems (Fairhead and Leach 1990; Hecht and Morrisson 2014), not just to extract but also to selectively regenerate. In the context of the central Indian region where I conducted fieldwork, the ecological historian Archana Prasad has examined Baiga shifting cultivation practices in light of the colonial state’s transformation of the region’s mixed forests into standing Sal forests and the resettlement of Baigas into enclaves as sedentary farmers, arguing that these conjoined processes decisively altered the vegetative and soil composition in the region in ways not easily reducible to binaries of destructive or sustainable use³². In the case of the Dangs region of Gujarat, in western Central India, Ajay Skaria has shown how the dynamics of firewood felling, mahua collection, shifting cultivation, fishing

³²Archana Prasad, *Forests and Subsistence in Colonial India: A Study of the Cenral Provinces, 1830-1945*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, (JNU, 1994). Also see Archana Prasad, *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity* (New Delhi, Three Press Collective, 2005).

and farming, shaped not only the physical forest in terms of species composition, undergrowth and soil content but also conceptions of the forest as a space of ‘*chhut*’ or freedom in the time of *moglai* (prior to state regulation and intervention) distinct from the time of *mandini* (a time of rampant state extraction and controls to people’s mobility within forests) (Skaria 1999).

In this chapter, I attempt to bring a somewhat different lens to bear on the question of what constitutes ‘pressure’ on forests by providing a descriptive account of the mutual impress of forest surfaces and human bodies on each other in the course of their everyday interactions. What modes of sensory knowing emerge from Baiga farmers’ day-to-day movements and activities within the forests of their neighborhood, how is the forest engaged as a sensuous surface in the course practical activity? What paths, trails, tracks, marks and indentations are left and followed as a material record of human and non-human activity? What things are picked, gathered, plucked, planted, cut or taken away? Conversely, how does the forest impress and express itself in materials, bodies and actions?² Through an account of Baiga farmers and forest-dwellers’ use and inhabitation of their neighboring forests, I hope to disclose a subtler, more granular picture of the entwinement of people and forests than is usually found in scholarly and activist debates, one that goes beyond the binary perceptions of forest-dweller as unthinking and indiscriminate user of forest resources or as a primordial custodian of natural habitations. I focus in this chapter on Baiga villagers’ seasonal gathering of forest materials; the collective activity of processing them for sale, and traversing forests to get to markets or other villages, especially chakoda seeds and fuel wood.

The first part of the chapter focusing on chakoda collection in the forest focuses on the relationship between movement and perception, treating collective walking as a suite of bodily techniques through which the environment is sensed. The latter part describes the

chopping of firewood and walking long distances for its sale, investigating how form is held, ephemerally in the context of skilled practice.

The forest and the village

Madagaur was bounded on three sides by Sal forests that rose up steeply from the boundaries of the fields. These forests were shared with the other villages of Mohti, Bitanpur, Sarai and Bona (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 - revenue maps of Madagaur village). For the inhabitants of Madagaur village in Dindori district, forests constituted a ‘condition of possibility’ (Khan 2015), in the simple sense that in their quiet and unobtrusive way, forests made life possible. Most inhabitants of the village depended heavily on forests to meet their daily needs of fuelwood, fodder grass, seasonal edible materials, and branches and leaves to construct temporary shelters. They went walking into the forests to have a think, youngsters to have amorous entanglements, and traversed them to get to neighboring villages or markets. This chapter concerns itself with the forest as encountered in the course of gathering its materials.

In household surveys administered to the ten Baiga households that I was most closely acquainted with, the following forest products were listed as most frequently gathered³³:

1. *chakoda (cassia tora)*, seeds and leaves; leaves harvested July-September, dried and stored till next season to make a bitter-tasting, fried vegetable (*bhaji*), (include picture), seeds harvested mainly in December and January and sold at process ranging from Rs. 4-8 per kg.
2. *Vanjeeth (rubia cordifolia)*; a perennial climber growing on the fences surrounding homes, a source of cash income in other villages but not in Madagaur.

³³ I am grateful to Venkat Ramanujam for making available his notes on non-timber forest produce available to collectors in Chapwar village, a village about 15 kilometers from Madagaur, where my own fieldwork was concentrated. I was able to cross-check many details regarding availability of and dependence on forest produce, procurement practices, and income contribution with my own observations, interviews and surveys conducted in Madagaur. I am also grateful to Balwant Rahangdale for making available the study on bio-diversity in the Baigachak area conducted under the auspices of the NGO, NIWCYD.

3. *Baibidang (embelia ribes)*: a seed in a pepper-like pod, collected for its medicinal properties, occasionally sold to local sub-contractors.
4. *Sal* seeds (*shorea robusta*): gathered in March, a nationalized (co-operativized) NTFP, which means that it can only be sold through the Madhya Pradesh (Minor Forest Produce (Trading and Development) Corporation (MFPFED). The majority of households in Madagaur collected sal seeds in 2011, 2012 and 2014, when they were procured by MP MFPFED at Rs. 10/kg. Ramanujam (2015) notes that Sal seeds were not a priority NTFP for the MP MFPFED in 2010, when they sold for lower prices than were paid out to village-level gatherers.
5. *Tendu* leaf (*diospyros melanoxylon*): gathered in April and May, nationalized or cooperativized NTFP, used to roll *beedis* or cigarettes, one of the most marketable and profitable NTFPs, of which the state of Madhya Pradesh supplies the largest volume (Lele and Ramanujam 2015).
6. *Chaar* leaf (*buchanania lanzan*); March, April, May. Used to fashion cups and plates (*donas*).
7. *Sal* leaf
8. *Mohlain leaf and binder (dor)*: used to bind headloads of wood
9. *Rar* (secretion of sal borer insect, used in ritual as incense and as ash).
10. *Pihiri* (mushroom): gathered during the monsoons.
11. Varieties of *kaanda* (tubers)
12. *Bhilwa* leaf (ritual and household use)
13. *Kosum* seed and flowers (*schleichera oleosa*)
14. Guava fruit
15. *Mahua* fruit, leaf, tree and flower (*madhuca longifolia*)
16. *Mukhari*: (a twig used for cleaning teeth and gums).
17. *Berries (ber) and Jaamun*.

The importance of forest products in sustaining the livelihoods of village households varied significantly and depended on a number of factors such as proximity to forest, the availability of specific nontimber products (NTFP) in adjoining forests, income from other sources such as agriculture, waged employment, and access to tertiary sector jobs³⁴. Although, in the everyday traffic of impressions, perceptions and opinions that permeated tea stalls, bus stops and administrative offices, the Baigas were quintessential forest-dwellers, who sustained both an expert and extractive relationship to it, intimate knowledge and use of surrounding forests was by no means, the exclusive preserve of the Baiga. Most inhabitants

³⁴ For the importance of forest produce in sustaining the household economy in the Mahakaushal region of Madhya Pradesh, see Sharachchandra Lele, Venkat Ramanujam and Jeetesh Rai *Cooperative Procurement and Marketing of Tendu Leaves in Madhya Pradesh: Image and Reality*. Environment and Development Discussion Paper No. 3. Ashoka Trust for Research on Ecology and Environment, 2015.

of Madagaur depended heavily on forests for their food and biomass needs; however, subtle distinctions of status and hierarchy shaded the use of and dependence on forest products. Walking to markets to sell firewood was thought of as something only Baiga women did, though women from other caste groups might have to walk long distances to collect for their own households. The more affluent households in Madagaur (even among Baigas) denied going to sell firewood even though they might collect for their own requirement. Several households would not admit to gathering chakoda, asserting, “We are not Baiga, that we have to eat *bhaji* made from chakoda. Such bad days haven’t befallen us, yet”. Chakoda was considered a ‘lowly’ plant, usually not good enough even to be made into cattle fodder; only people so poor that they had to forage for and gather every last saleable item from the forest would go to collect the plant. Other reasons cited for not going to collect forest produce were preoccupations with social occasions such as weddings, school examinations, and illnesses. Some poorer Gond and Ahir households complained that the Baigas consumed more than their fair share of the forest. While administering a household survey in the Ahir neighbourhood, I asked Parvatiya bai, who, together with her husband ran a small tailoring shop from their house, to check off a list of items from the forest they collected. She responded resentfully: “What is left for us, the Baiga have eaten the entire forest”. When pressed on why she felt the Baiga had “eaten the entire forest”, she retorted: “Because the state (*sarkaar*) has given them too much freedom (*chhoot*)”. On why she or her husband (they were childless), could not themselves gather forest produce, Parvatiya said:

“Because we are both ill. *Thakaan, kamzori* (tiredness, weakness). *Unko chhaati ki bimaari*” (He has a chest ailment). “So we only do a bit of farming (*thodi-bohot kheti se gujar chalt hai*), and a bit of tailoring. See, Gondiya [Sukhram Baiga’s daughter, in whose company I was frequently seen] has left a blouse. You can take it to her, since that’s where you live. “Look at me, look around you”, said Parvatiya gesturing to her house around her. “Do you see any riches, any things? Go to any Baiga house and you will see it littered with things from the forest, so much wood, so much wood they cut (*poooooora jangal kaat dis*).

Her plaintive voice followed me out of the door as I took my leave: “We are poor, madam, so poor, (*dukh hi dukh, maidam, dukh hi dukh*); yet the Sarkar has not thought it fit to give us a BPL (Below Poverty Line) card!” I came away from Parvatiya’s interview with the sense that the pressures of living were somehow greater upon them, because of the pressure the Baiga put on the forest.

Days in the Baiga hamlet were organized around visits to the forest. Men and boys would disappear into the forest for hours to hunt small game like wild pigs and certain species of rodents. In the festival season of Hariyali in early August when the young paddy crop made its first appearance, just before transplantation season, Baiga youngsters from miles around gathered at the ‘dadar’, the flat clearing atop the steep sal forests, for a day of drinking, flirtation, games and merriment. The shortest route to other villages to visit relations or attend market days was often through the forests. ‘*Kachu jaat has!*’ Where are you going!? ‘*Dongar jaat ho?*’ ‘Going to forest?’ was a commonly heard refrain. The frequency of forest visits depended on the time of year and the particular moment in the agricultural calendar. While fuelwood was gathered all year round, forest gathering activity intensified during ‘collection’ seasons, when nationalized forest produce like tendu or sal seeds, or locally-traded items like chakoda seeds were in abundance. Forests trips were sporadic during the harvest months (November and January), when all hands were needed to cart the harvest from the fields to homes, dry the paddy, and start threshing it. Gathering activity ceased almost entirely during the 4 monsoon months (June, July, August and September) when agricultural activity was at its peak, except for mushroom picking when word went round that they were plentiful and juicy.

These forest trips, mini-journeys in themselves, occurred as part of a fabric of movements, comings and goings that spanned neighboring villages, the district or block administrative centers, trips to pilgrimage spots like Amarkantak, and, occasionally, visits by

young men to the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh in search of seasonal employment. In what follows I give an account of several trips to and through the forest taken over three collection seasons with the women of Madagaur's Baiga neighbourhood. Rather than treating each walk as a separate excursion I present a composite narrative threading together impressions and experiences that occurred over several trips.

Movement and time: gathering chakoda

December, 2010

A freezing December morning unveils with the sound of Phulwati, Sukhram's wife, stoking the fire. The logs bump against one another and the earth floor, embers crackle, Phulwati coughs. The clang of bells suggests stirring cattle. The low whispers of a couple of neighbors who have come to partake of the warmth, the crack of a match as cigarettes are lit. The ubiquitous swish-swish of brooms sweeping earth floors. Next to me, Gondiya groans as she burrows deeper into the inviting warmth of the thick mattress made of kodo straw. More sounds are heard as life in the hamlet starts to stir awake—the clucking of chickens as they are let out of their pens, the grunts of pigs, and bleating goats. The sounds of utensils from last night being washed to make the day's food.

A *taskscape*, says Ingold, in contrast to a landscape, is heard before it is seen. Unlike a landscape, which presents itself as an optical array to be seen and need do nothing in itself, a taskscape suggests activity, and even more, *interactivity*. (Ingold 2000: 199). From these auditory beginnings, we are drawn into the activities of the day that pace themselves out. Stepping outside, several sleepy men are to be spotted, shivering in shawls, squatting, with *mukhari* or a twig that serves as toothbrush in their mouths, looking off into the distance. The women have gotten busier, sweeping or lighting fires.

The males of the house, Sukhram and his three sons, are nowhere to be seen, I know from previous stays that Sukhram is a very early riser, who enjoys solitary morning walks; his three sons usually sleep over at their friends' or cousins' places. Phulwati, Sukhram's wife, her mother-in-law Sonwati and daughter, Gondiya busy themselves with household chores. The

house is swept, last night's food emptied into the cattle pen, dirty dishes are carried to the nearby communal handpump to be washed. At 8 am, an ear-splitting honk announcing the one bus that comes to the village every 24 hours shatters this idyll; villagers needing to travel to other villages or the district or block headquarters scurry to the bus stop. The cooking fires started, Phulwati and her mother-in-law start pounding rice for lunch in different corners of the house. After a seemingly interminable boiling of rice and lentils, Gondiya comes round with a large copper bowl filled with freshly pumped water. Sukhram has come back by now, and he and myself, the lone guest, are served water to wash our hands and then food. When our plates are clean, they are removed and the spilled food swept out of the way.

The main task of the morning is the preparation of food, and with that completed, we prepare to leave for the forest to gather *chakoda* seeds. A plant whose seeds are sold to traders in the area, *chakoda* is the most abundant forest plant in this part of Samnapur at this time of year. Earlier in the year, when the plant is young, its leaves are gathered and dried and stored and eaten as bitter fried greens during the monsoon. Since it is winter, the morning preparations are leisurely, unlike during *tendu* season in May, when gatherers leave much more briskly. It is difficult to convey the sense of the passage of time that accompanies this preparation, so I cite excerpts from my fieldnotes.

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 8.30 am. | |
| Phulwati | Shall we go, Mayawati? |
| Me | Yes, I'm ready. |
| Gondiya | You'll come too? |
| Me | Yes, don't I always? |
| Phulwati | Eyyyy...why will you walk all the way uphill (<i>ghati ghati</i>), you'll get tired, stay home and watch the house. |
| Me [stubborn] | No, I want to come. |
| Bhadiya (neighbor) | [stolls in looking weak and ill] Going to - dongar? |
| Me | Yes. You're coming? |
| Bhadiya | ' <i>Haath pair nahi chale, sab peeraath hai</i> ' (My hands and feet aren't working, everything hurts). |
| Phulwati | Aaaah... How will you come then? |
| Bhadiya | Aaaah... I don't know, I don't know (' <i>Nahi jaanoon nahi jaanoon</i> '). |

Phulwati and Gondiya prepare cloth bags that each carry a sickle, some guavas and a woven cane cushion to rest headloads on. Chain Singh (neighbor), strolls past.

Chain Singh Going to the forest, madam?
Me Yes, are you coming?
Chain Singh No.
Me Where are you going, then?
Chain Singh Me, I'm going to go round and round, here and there, see the world a bit (*Ghoomela, duniya dekhela*)
Phulwati Aaaah... he will [only] drink.

The girls from across the house are to join us. Gondiya to the toddler who lives in the house across from us:

Gondiya “Eiiii, where’s your mother and your aunts? Go fetch them, or we’ll take you instead and make you cut chakoda with us”.
Toddler looks skeptical. His heavily pregnant mother, Manwati, emerges from hut.
Gondiya “*Chalbe?*” “Coming?”
Manwati “No, I have pains, I am going to get medicines and injections (*suji-goli*)”

Gopal, Sukhram’s eldest son wanders in, and his mother asks him what his plans are for the day and if he will go to Manikpur about 5 km away to collect the 5000 Rs in compensation that the family are owed due to their lentil crop being destroyed by the frost.

Gopal I’m not sure, I might go... I’ll see.
Phulwati Arrey! What do you mean you’ll see? Who will collect the cash, then? How will we...??
Gopal (Looks over at me, sideways.) “Its only money we have a problem for, sister. For everything else, we have the *jangal*”.
Gondiya (anxiously) “Gopal, collect the exam form from Chandrani, if you’re going to Manikpur. Don’t we have to submit our forms?”
Gopal “I don’t feel well, I’m going to ask the old man, [his grandfather] for some *jari* to cure me”.
 “What ails you?” I ask.
Dadi [grandfather] (mockingly) “It is love (*‘maya lagis, man par gaye kissi pe’*). He is besotted, his heart has come on someone.”
Gopal “Stop babbling, old man!! Give me your concoction for *kamzori* (weakness).”

10.00 am

We gather in front of the neighborhood on the rocky path that leads from the village to the forest. The boundary demarcating village from forest begins with a gap in the line of trees, winding steeply upwards. The path is a well-trodden one, and tall brown grass, a variety of shrubs, short and thin-stemmed trees and taller, more imposing sal and saja trees are to either side. Six women besides myself, armed with sickles and axes, shawls wound round our bodies or rolled atop our heads, begin the trek.

Passer by: “*Dongar Jaat ho?*” (Going to forest?)

Women in chorus: “To-forest!” (*Dongar-la!*)

“To-forest?”

“Yes, yes, to-forest”

“Well, make sure you don’t lose the madam, and bring me back lots of chakoda *bhaaji*, then.”

“Will do!”

The women’s conversation revolves mostly around the drinking habits of the men, one of the women particularly irate as she described the drunken violence of her husband the night before. Our little group proceeded, the women talking fast, but eyes peeled, scanning the surroundings for useful leaves or berries. Occasionally, one of the women breaks the line to lean over, climb a little higher with the help of a root growing into the ground, to pick a particularly succulent batch of young tendu leaves to roll cigarettes with. When we reach a clearing mid-way to the top, the women set down their bundles and drink from a clear puddle. Some women disappear to relieve themselves. Gondiya’s grandmother perches, birdlike, on a rock, scanning around her, taking in her surrounds. “What are you looking/searching for?” I ask. “*Dekht hoon...mil jaat hai, kachu kachu*,” she responds, “I’m looking to see what I can find.”

We eventually reach to the top, pausing to catch our breaths, stretch, squat in the tall brown grass, drink water from a nearby pond, and munch on our fruit. Sukkal, the lone man in the group, who already seems to have gathered spoils from the jungle, walks around dragging his feet in the waist-high brown grass, slashing at it with his sickle; he looks attentive, appears to be searching for something quite specific. Another troop of women from the other Baiga neighborhood emerges. Heaving themselves up, the women start out slow, kicking aside blades

of grass, looking for chakoda; then when they spot a thick clump, bend down the waist and start cutting.



Fig. 6. Harvesting Chakoda.

This goes on for quite a while, each woman quite intensely absorbed in her task, a quiet competition to get to the thickest clumps animating their otherwise placid movements. Soon, they have all fanned out, bent almost double, slashing at the shrubbery. Every now and then, a kind of musical hoot issues from the distance, almost like a birdcall. An answering call echoes from somewhere in the tall grass. This way, the women check on members of their group. They work rapidly, filling their shawls with prickly branches. It is very hot and the work, back breaking.

Budhram, Gondiya's younger brother, appears suddenly, climbing up from a steep part of the incline, holding on to rocks as he climbs; he hasn't followed the path we took. He is wearing an old forest-ranger's hat and carrying a dead snake skin. As he brandishes it in front of Badhiya, she smacks it away, 'Don't dangle that in front of me, and get it away.'

1.00 pm. The women collect together once again, compare loads. There's a quick consultation. Enough? More? One more round? How should we do it then? Go there? That side? Much pointing and chatting ensues. One more round is the consensus. They go in a slightly different direction, a bit further and disperse again. Phulwati says, "Rest up, Mayawati. Graze us, like we graze cattle".

The chakoda crop is threshed by laying it on down gunny sacks and crushing it underfoot. This separates the seed from the plant. The crushing takes a while, so one's mind and eyes are free to wander and ponder while the feet do their work (Fig. 6). The women's feet get more and more dusty as they slowly and rhythmically crush the prickly twigs beneath their feet. Bits of wood and husk are then blown away, and the separated seed carefully gathered and put away in shawls. Badhia and Sukkal, working as a team, appear to have gathered the most. We move across the clearing, everybody gathering what they can and stopping intermittently to compact their load by crushing the plant beneath their feet. After many hours, the women seem satisfied that they have collected all that's available for the day, and we begin to make our way down. Downhill seems more treacherous than uphill, and I slip repeatedly; cries of 'dekhi!' (watch out!) are interspersed with 'Renge! Renge!' "Walk walk!" We negotiated a particularly scary bit of descent where a narrow path yields on one side to a steep tree-filled cliff. As we pass in single file, each woman breaks off a leaf, laying it on a stone jutting out from the cliff face, an offering without ceremony. Badhiya offers an explanation, talking as she walks:

"Once a father-in-law ran away with his daughter-in-law. The husband followed them and killed them both. We never cross this place in the forest without offering a leaf at the spot at which he was killed, otherwise, we too will trip and fall to our deaths".

Gesturing to another spot, waving with her right hand while her left balances long branches of chakoda, Badhiya tells me, "This is a snake's den, be careful!" I try to get her to tell me a little more, but she has spotted a tree, and calls out to her husband. There is an answering call, and in a trice, husband and wife clamber up and start stripping the tree off its branches with their axe. Seamlessly, the other girls unload their chakoda, open the shawls and start crushing it beneath their feet, waiting for the others who are gathering firewood

Soon the air is full of the thumping of axe on wood as heavy branches are stripped down to size. *Barmasiya*, (meaning twelve-monthly, also known as *mohlain*), is used to bind the wood. The wood will be sold in the market the next day for fifty rupees (less than a dollar). The short sarees, about thigh length for the older women, make it easy to move about the tangled undergrowth without getting, caught. I am a clumsy contrast, my long shalwar constantly getting caught in thorns and bushes. The procession wends its way downward. Sukkual brings up the rear, now carrying an entire tree on his back. On our way down, single file is harder to maintain as people crouch, lean and clamber here and there to get whatever

they can on the way home. Phulwati breaks off a branch of sal leaves to make into cups and plates. Gondiya grabs my hand, and with the sap from a young mahua plant, draws an invisible pattern on the back of my hand. She bends down, picks up some wood ash from the



Fig. 7. Threshing Chakoda

forest floor and rubs it on the sap...a black tattoo of a lotus emerges, as though it were invisible ink. There is little talk, for everyone is tired. The day's work is not yet done. There is food to cook when we get back home, dishes to be washed, water to fetch.

This routine is followed day after day, every day till most homes are piled with mounds of chakoda seeds about 5 feet high. In a few weeks, the 'agent', or the sub-contractor, a young Muslim man from Manikpur village, known only as the 'Pathaan', will come round to weigh and buy the chakoda. Unlike tendu leaf, trading in chakoda is not cooperativized and collectivized. The collection agent comes round when chakoda is in season, mentions the going price, (about Rs. 7 a kilo), and advises people that they had better collect as much as they can and sell soon. The sale itself is informally conducted, in the courtyard of one of the homes. Word goes round that the collection agent is weighing out chakoda and people bring their respective collections in gunny sacks, empty them out and sit around. People jeer and there are light-hearted exclamations about the chakoda being under-weighed. Children roll and play in

the piles of seeds till they are shooed away by their mothers. No visible records are kept of each person's chakoda sale, but a few weeks later, the collection agent comes to the hamlet again bearing cash that he will disburse individually to different households. Whenever news spreads that cash disbursal is underway, a murmur of anticipation spreads through the hamlet. Neighbors slowly gather in each others' homes to keep a track of what another is receiving for their collections. Though the figures weren't written down as far as I could tell, everybody seemed to know their own and their neighbors' exact contribution.

| | |
|----------|--|
| Pathaan | "How much was yours?" |
| Neighbor | " <i>Bees kilo rahis</i> " "Twenty kilos". |
| Pathan | " <i>Kahaan bees!</i> " "Twenty! I don't think so!" |
| Neighbor | " <i>Eeeyyyyy</i> , don't cheat now. It was twenty". |

After some haggling, the pathaan will pay out the cash and the villager, seemingly reluctantly will take the sweaty, torn notes in his hand, slowly smoothing them out, feeling them, and putting them away.

How might we understand this diffuse experience of life itself unfolding? Seasonally, diurnally, in fits and starts, long stretches of time stretched out in the doing off tasks, punctuated by moments of alertness, confusion, or excitement? It seems to me that a more disjointed analysis, than a seamless semiotic connectedness forming an 'open whole' (Kohn), is called for.

The preamble to the forest walk itself, a long, unclear wait from the perspective of the impatient city-dweller, is accompanied by the joining and not joining of people's activities to each other, in which people spend considerable time considering their options. There is a seemingly endless time of "Are you going?" "Yes/no/I don't know...", "What?" "How?" "Where are you going?", "How are we doing this, then?" Other considerations—collecting money, filling school forms, have to be taken into account. Scholars have remarked upon the different logics of time and work that govern 'traditional', 'pre-industrial' or 'subsistence'

communities and in capitalist or industrialized economies (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Thompson 1967; Sahlins 1969). For the former, Ingold suggests, 'time is intrinsic to the array of specific tasks that make up the quotidian activity of the community' (Ingold 2000: 323), as opposed to the externally imposed, enforced logics of industrial work time that are based on establishing absolute distinctions between the time of work and social time. However, the time of the state and the market are not external to this apparently harmonious sense of 'task-orientation', of time diffuse and immanent in a succession of activities, but rather, result in these activities being shot through with a kind of minor anticipation and anxiety. Days were lived out in the course of activities that took place simultaneously or followed one another but there was an ever-present awareness of a clock that ticked to a different rhythm. People were constantly alert to news of government schemes whose deadlines they might miss, or of compensation due to be paid into bank accounts, or having to make a dash to another village to catch the revenue officer for his signatures before he rode away on his motorbike. Neither could a case be made for a time of 'nature' separate from industrial work-time. Chakoda, tendu, sal, mahua and wood from the forest were all sold and traded in local markets in addition to subsistence consumption, and though they could only be gathered seasonally, there was pressure to gather as much as possible within the limited duration of collection season. On a few occasions, Gondiya had to take off from school so that she, her mother and grandmother could gather as much as they could between them.

As we make the ascent into the forest, the chatter continues, but village affairs gradually take a backseat as women become alert and observant to what is available around them. The distinctiveness of the entry into the forest is manifested in practical activity, rather than any sense of a self-contained world. In *Wanderlust* (Solnit 2000), Rebecca Solnit notes the many philosophical, aesthetic and ethical currents historically associated with walking as a practice, but the walk up to the forest is unlike the practice of city walking immortalized in Michel De

Certeau's anonymous, alienated city walker, or Benjamin's aesthete *flâneur* (De Certeau 1984; Benjamin 1999). Rural walking practices, unlike urban movement, have received comparatively little attention, with a few notable exceptions³⁵. My attention was first drawn to walking as the form of locomotion most common in the area of research, by how much of it I had to do in order to get from place to place. The bus service to surrounding villages from Samnapur was unpredictable, and when buses arrived they would often be crowded beyond capacity, so it was simpler to walk. Walking meant that I often got lost on my way through unfamiliar roads, fields and forest paths, so I would attach myself to other walkers who would take me part of the way and then hand me over to someone else till I was deposited in the field village. Eventually, without any conscious effort at learning or remembering and without any navigational aids, my feet would carry me, of their own accord as it were, from the Manikpur bus stop to my main field site, Madagaur village. I would feel tired at roughly the same time, stop under the same mango tree for a drink of water, learned to look out for the treacherous hole in the bund between two fields where my foot would get stuck. The NGO who hosted and supported my fieldwork, Ekta Parishad, was, for almost two years engaged in 'mobilizing' people for a land rights march from Gwalior in MP to Delhi. In their mobilization speeches, activists would often invoke the bodily capacity to walk endless distances as a 'power' that poor, rural and landless people had, that must be harnessed to march for their rights. Finally, since few homes in the region owned any private means of transport, people walked everywhere— to their neighbors' homes, to fair price shops to purchase rations, to the block headquarters for official work.

³⁵ See Lye Tuck-Po 'Before a Step too Far: Walking with Batek Hunter-Gatherers in the Forests of Pahang, Malaysia' in *Ways of Walking*, Tim Ingold and Joe Lee Vergunst, pp. 21-35 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008); Perenille Gooch, 'Feet Following Hooves' in *Ways of Walking*, Tim Ingold and Joe Lee Vergunst, 67-81 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008); R. Ibanez-Martin, "The Politics of Walking: Rural Women's Encounters with Space and Memoir" *The Unfamiliar*, 5 no. 102 (2016): 56-64.

In the gathering expedition described above, the relationship between walkers and the paths and trails walked, created or trampled through the undergrowth is a dynamic, moving one, reconstituted with each walk. Forest paths, unlike tarred roads are worn into the vegetation; they are surfaces that do not readily hold their form (Ingold and Vergunst 2008); therefore, each walk reconstitutes the path physically as well as experientially. Each walk is a plethora of projects and possibilities, some realized, some remaining unrealized. While the literature on walking frequently treats walking as an enactment of memory and practice of memorializing the past, forest expeditions of the sort described above complicate the linearity of past, present and future—the recalling and retelling of the deeds of those who have moved in the landscape before becomes inseparable from an orientation towards what Jane Guyer has called the ‘near future,’ both folded into an immersive present of movement (Guyer 2007). Michel De Certeau equates walking to ‘pedestrian speech acts’ (De Certeau 1984, 97). That is, he sees walking as a spatial practice with unlimited enunciatory possibilities. De Certeau likens walking to the relationship of individual speech acts to language; through myriad individualized walking practices, innumerable anonymous city-walkers daily appropriate and subvert the totalizing vision that organizes the city through multiple signifying practices (naming, numbering, etc). De Certeau suggests that walking enacts a “sieve-order - relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order”...and the surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning” (1984, 107). Moving within a forest is different kind of spatial enactment altogether. It is not that one actualizes— by contracting or expanding— some of the possibilities conceptualized by a grid, rather, it is in the nature of a composition, the same route enacts and memorializes different possibilities each time it is travelled. Its possibilities are perceived and activated differently each time in navigating the same well-trodden path. People join in, spread out, emerge suddenly from thickets, or go off to the sides to pluck and gather something that they have spotted. In

the cities of De Certeau's description there is the graphic trail and unlimited enunciatory possibilities, in the kind of walking described here, the trail is composed each time anew.

This composition, or rather choreography, activates a particular suite of moving 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1973) in the course of collectively moving with a folded, indented 'landscape of movement.' This collective choreography, centering rural women's bodily engagements with their environment and with each other in the course of gathering work, challenges the figure of the solitary male as the prime agent of movement immortalized in much of the literature around walking, as well as the bipedality implicit in the idea of walking itself. Walking in this case includes crouching, squatting, scrambling, climbing, crushing and sitting/pausing; being forwardly borne on one's feet is one among this entire suite of bodily practices.

In addition to expanding the definition of walking as a solitary, male, bipedal, forward-borne activity, the forest expedition disturbs the primacy of the visual sense in the activity of perception. In the course of gathering forest produce, 'scanning' is a constant activity performed by the entire body involving a multi-sensory engagement with one's physical environment and co-actors, incorporating auditory, tactile and visual modes of sensing one's surroundings. This is in contrast to Erving Goffman's picture of scanning as a primarily *visual* activity performed during walking, enabling the walker to perceptually and physically adjust himself to those whom he perceives to approach him, from the front, sides, or even from behind (Goffman 2009). Goffman describes the walker as a pilot steering his ship, encased in a sort of soft-shell casing of skin and clothes. The walker thus navigates his way retaining a sense of his separateness from the world, angling or turning his body to avoid banging into anything or anyone. The modes of scanning entailed in the kind of movements described in this chapter are not only visual, they require different kinds of bodily adaptations

and adjustments, and point to a very different sense of the moving self in relation to a particular physical environment.

The gathering of the chakoda plant is both an immersively solitary activity and completely shared. While each person gathers for herself and her family, the women constantly call out to each other, check on each other's collections, alert each other to where there is better crop and where it's dwindling. The actions performed by the body while harvesting, threshing and gathering chakoda, eyes scanning, feet crushing, are performed in unison as though a choreography learned together. How do we understand such a constitution of bodies, selves and ecological milies?

In a fascinating essay titled "Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet" Tim Ingold argues that the human evolutionary narrative features bipedality, the erect posture, and the oppositional thumb as the distinctive factors allowing humans to make the evolutionary leap forward from other beings (Ingold 2004). This is accompanied, in modernity, by the devaluation of the work of the feet in comparison with hands, that are associated with tool use, skill and intellectual activity. The work of the feet in contrast, is to bind the human organism to the earth, the material ground of all social activity. The mechanization of footwork and footwear, along with a host of other developments, are the ways in which, according to Ingold, modern civilizations elevate the head and hands, associated with intellectual and social advancement, divorced from biological life. By Ingold's reasoning, subsistence communities like the Baiga do not make this separation. Indeed, as William Mazarella notes in a review of Ingold's work, the romance of Ingold's 'sentient ecology' and 'dwelling perspective' is in self-conscious opposition to what Michel Foucault has described as the "modernist episteme"— "the conscious and interlocking field of assumptions, concepts and discourses, that have, since the Enlightenment, constituted social life as the field of scientific as well as interpretive inquiry" (Foucault 1966/1970;

Mazzarella 2002), that attain their persuasive efficacy first and foremost by abstracting from the world that is under study. For Ingold, this perspective is epitomised in Descartes, for whom the picture of the human was of a self-contained subject making sense of an external world by means of the exercise of disembodied reason. In contrast, Ingold has developed a way of thinking about perception and activity that begins in the world, with sensuous beings moving about through interactive, or rather interagentive environments (Ingold 2001). The work of subsistence communities thus integrates the material world, the biological body, and the social self. To the extent that the body and self are indivisibly engaged with the environment the forest worker can be said to be akin to Ingold's 'organism-person' whose biological and social existence are simultaneously brought forth in the course of the collective work of survival. We are in tricky territory here, and risk lapsing into the racialized reduction to biological, natural life that has long legitimised, globally, the colonization of indigenous populations like the Baiga. But, William Mazzarella notes: "Ingold acknowledges the impeccable liberal pedigree of culturalist explanations of differences that a century ago were generally thought to be "racial" but also points out that this practice has left us in a conceptual cul-de-sac wherein our only escape from racist thinking is to separate culture from biology" (Mazzarella 2002).

I understand Ingold's conceptual problematic to be around the question of adaptation. How do we explain how humans co-evolve with their environments, without either reducing them to biotic components of their environments, as in, say, the tradition of subsistence studies inaugurated Julian Steward (2006), or only restrict our focus to 'models' of the environment that may be available from cultural elaborations. In one sense, all the anthropologists that we have discussed in the chapter thus far are grappling with the same problem. One way in which Ingold develops his 'dwelling perspective' of beings in synchrony with their environments, that escapes this binary, is by building on the concept of

‘affordances’ put forth by psychologist James Gibson (1979). James Gibson claims that what is perceived (by an animal) is not merely surface or depth or contour in the material world but also, in the very same act of perception, the potentialities of the object for the particular organism/animal doing the perceiving. That is, “animals perceive environmental objects in terms of what they afford, positively or negatively, for the consummation of behaviour (Ingold 1992, 42). Gibson writes that “the *affordances* of an environment...are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (Gibson 1979, 127). An affordance is always *relative* to the being doing the perceiving. Thus, a surface, (in this case a stone), is perceived as a surface that can be squatted on, to better take in the surrounding environment for particular useful materials.

If we return to the ethnography for a moment, consider Gondiya’s grandmother’s action of perching on a rock to drink water on our way up to to the forest. Aaji squats on a rock, drinks from a puddle and turns herself this way and that, her fingers planted near her feet for balance, eyes trained some distance away, seeking something. When asked what she is looking for, she answers abstractedly, ‘*Dekht hoon...mil jaat hai, kachu kachu*’. Earlier I translated this as “I’m looking to see what I can find”, but the sense of her answer is perhaps better conveyed by “I’m looking.... something [useful] will pop up, reveal itself”. Scanning here is an action performed by the entire body, the ‘organism-person’ attuned to clues in the surroundings as to available resources. This person in her environment could not be further from Goffman’s imagination of a pilot sitting in an enclosed container, navigating a vessel.

By perception, Gibson means this conjointness of moving about in, attending to, taking in and fitting oneself to specific things in the environment that make themselves available, relative to particular beings, in the course of their particular projects in the world. What of course becomes problematic here on, is whether humans perceive in the same way as non-humans do. Thus, while a bird may use a stone to sharpen its beak, a crab to crawl under

it for shelter, a human (and perhaps other primates) might use the stone as a perch (like a bird), or as a missile to hurl at someone. However, only for humans, who have a home in language, is a stone a *stone*. The example of the stone, which Gibson raises and Ingold follows up on, is a tricky one, because it brings up the question of the particular form of life that can also use a stone as a missile, to hurl and hurt. Gibson himself says— “the launching of missiles by supplementary tools other than the hands alone... is one of the behaviors that makes the human animal a nasty, dangerous species (Gibson 1979, 133). Or, consider the instance of Gondiya showing me the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the stem of the young mahua plant— she showed me how it worked like invisible ink, revealing the design that was produced in the interaction of the sap and my skin cells. How do we reconcile the possibilities for violence and aesthetic creation that seem to be a uniquely human preserve?

To loop back to the discussion that I opened this chapter with, for Ingold, as for other anthropologists of nature-culture boundary worlds, the question of the distinctiveness of the human form of life seems always to end up in a kind of residual discomfort. In the particular essay on which this discussion is based³⁶, Ingold effects from this question by saying that “although humans undoubtedly have the capacity to adopt...a ‘designer orientation’ towards the environment, *I do not think this is the way it [the environment] is normally perceived in everyday life* (Ingold 2002, 43, emphasis mine). No more than other animals can human beings *live* in a permanently suspended condition of contemplative detachment (emphasis original). If the animal is always and immediately ‘one with its life activity’, so is the human *for much (if not all) of the time* (emphasis mine)” (Ingold 2002, 44). Thus, the contemplative

³⁶ Tim Ingold, “Culture and the perception of the environment,” in *Bush Base, Forest Farm*: edited by Elisabeth Croll and David Parkin, 39-57 (New York: Routledge, 2002).

and deliberative aspect of human life is again separated from organic life. But why must Aaji's explanation— "I'm looking...things will be found"— be something separate from her activity in the world— of the perching-and-scanning that she periodically did on our way up? Here, I find it helpful to turn to Veena Das' particular reading of Wittgenstein's idea of the absorption of the natural into the social. Das, citing from Wittgenstein's file papers compiled in *Zettel*, quotes,

"The dog means something by wagging its tail. What grounds would one give for saying that? – does one also say: by dropping its leaves, the plant means that it needs water?" (Zettel, 521, cited in Das "Wittgenstein"). Thus, while we can imagine an expression such as "oh, the plant is dropping its leaves, it is asking for water", this construction is evidence of the way the natural is absorbed into the social, not that the plant intends to convey some meaning to us (Das, "Wittgenstein", p. 3).

Language, in other words, constitutes the limits of a human form of life. The perception of nonhuman intentionality is folded into ordinary language, which is what the anthropologist must pay attention to. What kind of thing it makes *sense* to say, is what would point us to how sociality in a milieu, human or otherwise is actually co-constituted in the course of intersubjective interaction.

This is a somewhat different picture of human and other-than-human becomings and connectedness than advanced by either Kohn or Ingold. In Kohn we find a striving for a theoretical account of a perfect semiotic intelligibility which does not center itself on intentionality or language. The world as sign system, where if a dog barks or plant drops a leaf it *means* something to someone, human or otherwise, buttressed by a radically *a*-human theory of selfhood and aboutness. Ingold, for his part, is most interested in the region of the self that is activated in the performance of the most mundane daily tasks, and in the interests of not falling back into the nature-culture, biology-sociology, human-non-human binaries

resorts instead to what Morten Pedersen calls ‘the fetish of connectivity,’³⁷ coming to dwell intensely on what is activated in the moment of connection - the foot on the ground, the axe-blade on the grain of the wood, or, drawing from Gibson, of eyes in a head, perched on a body, with the entire apparatus moving in tandem with its milieu. I wonder if the hyphenated term, organism-person is necessarily the best way to capture this, and if Wittgenstein’s delineation of horizontal and vertical forms of life might not, in fact, give an alternate voice to what it means for natural and social life to become absorbed into one another.

Coming back to the instance of Aaji and her companions on that day of chakoda-gathering in the forest, perception is as much about an embodied ‘moving with’ the affordances of one’s milieu as it is about the urgencies, contingencies and possibilities of shared, creaturely life within that milieu. When Phulwati invites me to rest awhile and make myself comfortable, by saying, “graze us, like we graze cattle”, she is inviting me, through her particular choice of words, to make a home in a form of life that is foreign to me.

When it is time in the evening for the goats to come home, Phulwati and Rumawati jointly speculate on why they are bleating (‘*maaaa maaaaa*, they are calling for their mother; they are late today, why?’). In such fleeting moments of reflection, our attention is drawn to moments of shared life that are not reliant on a stable cosmology to sustain them. In the context of the Baiga and other indigeneous communities in India, this is important to note, because myth and lore are available only as fragments and traces; how and to what extent this is related to the brutality with which indigenous connections to their landscape have been decimated, is a subject for another discussion.

³⁷ Morten Axel Pedersen, “The Fetish of Connectivity” in *Objects and Materials: A Routledge Companion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

Form

January 2011, Cutting/Wood

Gopal had been drinking, and was in an expansive mood.

“We are fine because we have the forest. *Lakdi hain toh raja hain*. As long as there is wood, we can live like kings. There is no dearth of anything here, only cash. Bring out your recorder, *didi*. Kesram and I will tell a *kissa* (tale)”.

On cold evenings, chores done for the day, we would warm ourselves by the lit logs in the courtyard, neighbors joining us to share their day. *Kissas* and *dadariyas*, riddles and jokes flowed fast and thick, [“What has tongues but cannot eat? Fire!” “What’s red and juicy and delicious and burns? *Ber!*”]. In the opening vignette to this chapter, Gopal ran his hands along each part of his lovingly crafted cart, distinguishing the wood by its grain. This sense of abundance and plenty was fleeting: residents of the Baiga tola were anxious that the Village Forest Protection Committee, the leadership of which had passed from Sukhram’s hands to a Gond woman in a distant hamlet, would, in cahoots with the forest department, succeed in fencing off large tracts of neighboring forest, preventing nearby residents from accessing it for their everyday needs. “They will bring down the line”, said Sukhram anxiously. He was referring literally to the line of trees that bordered the village fields. The forest department, could, from the point of view of village inhabitants, arbitrarily encroach upon their fields by planting a new line of eucalyptus trees. “They are saying they’re going to fence the whole forest (*rundhvaai kara denge*). It will become a crime to go into the forest with an axe and sickle. Arre, if a man can’t go into the forest, what will he eat?”

Chopping wood in reserved forests, since the Indian Forest Act of 1927, has wavered between an offence, a limited concession granted on a piecemeal basis, and a right for ‘bonafide livelihood needs’ (Forest Rights Act, Chapter II). The Madhya Pradesh Forest department website lists illicit felling, along with illicit grazing, illicit collection of forest produce, and the setting off of forest fires as punishable offences under various forest and wildlife related legal provisions. More recently, with environment protection NGOs

cementing themselves in the area, “we must not chop wood, we must save the forest” (*lakdi nahi kaatna hai, jangal bachana hai*), has come to be repeated as a learned expectation with varying degrees of enthusiasm in different villages. I inquired in Madagaur as to the antecedents of this expectation, “we must not chop wood”. A distinction was made by villagers between *geeli lakdi* (fresh or wet wood) and *sukhi lakdi* (dry or deadwood)³⁸. They insisted that they only chopped *sukhi lakdi*, even though I frequently noticed the ceiling beams of Sukhram’s house lined with logs of fresh cut wood placed end to end. Other villagers would come in furtively to buy these, usually for domestic construction, and Sukhram and his sons or the buyer and his sons would complete the transaction and come and collect them at night. When neighbors came on furtive errands, like buying liquor, or medicine for a secret affliction, or stolen wood, the transactions would usually take place in the smaller, darker room belonging to Aaji-Dadi (grandma and grandpa).

“Why only at night?” I asked on one occasion, when an Ahir neighbor came with two others to collect about half a dozen logs. Sukhram was evasive, but upon my persistent questioning admitted that he didn’t want to the forest ranger to see the logs. “Otherwise,” he said, “we’ll have to make him ‘happy’. Feed him chicken and alcohol, and then he’ll get drunk and make a nuisance of himself.”

Officials at the Samnapur and Dindori forest range offices regarded the harvesting of firewood by locals as an offence, and cited the 1980 Indian Forest Conservation Act in defense of their position. “We turn the other way when they take wood for their everyday needs’, I was informed by L.N. Tiwari, the DFO (Divisional Forest Officer) of Dindori district in 2012. “But when they interfere with forest department work, it’s a different matter. We do only ‘yield-based felling’, logging mandated by the working plan for each

³⁸ Bhargupati Singh notes that forest-users in Baran district in Rajasthan make the same distinction (Singh 2015). In Dindori as in Baran, deadwood was hardly sufficient for people’s fuel and construction needs.

compartment”. That the science of colonial ‘forest management’ is a euphemism for the rampant extraction of commercially valuable timber is too well-documented to need recounting here (Guha 1998; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). Trucks laden with freshly hewn logs regularly clogged the Dindori-Amarkantak road en route to the timber market in Karanjia. H.S Singh, the head of the District Agricultural Office (*Zila Krishi Kendra*), put it more colorfully. After reeling off statistics from a large ledger about the extent of land area under various Kharif and Rabi crop, he responded with a parable when he heard that my ‘research topic’ was people’s relationship to forests.

“Once a king lost his way in a hunt, and chanced upon a Baiga settlement deep in the forest. A Baiga farmer made him feel very welcome, offered him a place to stay the night, and impressed the king with his simple hospitality. Impressed, the king gifted him a sandalwood orchard. The Baiga farmer slowly cut down the orchard to meet his fuel needs. When famine struck, to make ends meet, he decided to sell off the few bundles of sandalwood that he had remaining. Upon realizing their value, he was stunned, and bemoaned the fact that he had consumed an orchard-full of such valuable wood.”

“And what is the moral of this story?” asked Mr. Singh, pausing for effect. He proceeded to answer: “Don’t fritter your life away like burnt charcoal”. As an afterthought, he added: “The Baiga can never realize the value of what all the state does for them”. The story expressed the dichotomy between the statist lens for valuing forests in terms of its available quantity of valuable, saleable timber, and local forest users who sustained a much more plural, if not necessarily ‘ethical’ or ‘sustainable’ sense of the value of forests. However, this was also turned into a moral fable of profligacy, illiteracy, and the general resistance of the local populace to well-intentioned improvement efforts of the state and NGOs.

In Madagaur, women from the Baiga tola generally went into the forest twice a day during the winters to stockpile enough wood for the summer and monsoon. In addition, men and boys went up sporadically to hunt for particular species of wood that could be fashioned

into tools, fencing, roofing and furniture. Baiga women, distinguished by their short, white sarees and colorful bead jewelry were frequently to be seen walking fast in single file, bringing firewood on market days. Gond and Ahir women I conversed with said that they would not be seen going to markets bearing headloads of wood. On one such trip, Phulwati handed me her axe and asked to chop the branch of a tree she had felled the previous day. ‘Here, you try’, she said. I landed a few unsuccessful blows: the sound of axe on wood making a distinctive thump— similar, rhythmic thumps from around told us that others were busy at the same task. Gondiya hopped anxiously each time I brought the axe down. “Your foot! *Didi* watch your foot!” Phulwati taught me to angle the axe, along the grain, chipping away at it till the outer bark was stripped off exposing the more pliant, fibrous substance underneath, cold and wet to the touch. The log thinned, finally severing.

In an essay entitled “The Textility of Making”, Ingold offers the following meditation on carpentry as skilled practice:

“The practised woodman brings down the axe so that its blade enters the grain and follows a line already incorporated into the timber through its previous history of growth, when it was part of a living tree. The carpenter is ‘one who fashions’ (Sanskrit, *taksati*), a shaper or maker... The carpenter, it seems, was as much a weaver as a maker. [His] making was itself a practice of weaving: not the imposition of form on pliant substance but the slicing and binding of fibrous material” (Ingold 2009, 92).

Ingold contrasts this ‘weaving model’ to the hylomorphic model wherein creativity is seen as the bringing together of form and matter but in a way in which form comes to be imposed as an agent with a particular design in mind, upon passive and inert matter (Ingold 2009, 92). In the former, form is not imposed on substance through external action, but is, rather, immanent within ‘fields of force and flows of material’ and ‘it is by intervening in these force fields and following the lines of flow that things are made’, that is, take on form (2009, 91). Morten Axel Pedersen calls this the ‘fetish of connectivity’ (Pedersen 2009). In his exploration of Mongolian shamanism, through the artefact of the shamanistic gown,

Pedersen forwards his idea of ‘creative cutting’³⁹. His aim is to ‘challenge the interpretive possibility of limitlessness’ (Pedersen 2009) that underwrites this fetish of connectivity. If phenomenologists focus on relationality, practices that ‘bring the cosmos into closer proximity with itself by facilitating ever less distance between subjects and objects’, what critical space might be opened up by exploring ‘creative cuts that expose dormant cracks in the fabric of worlds by triggering capacities within persons and things for self-differentiation’? (2009, 198) Regarding Ingold’s phenomenology of woodcutting, Pedersen brings up the daily cutting of wood by his own interlocutors, who were skilled enough at chopping wood without injuring themselves, but had little or no interest in carpentry. As with the villagers I accompanied into the forest splitting wood was not about the binding of ‘binding of fibrous material’ into new shapes but rather about ‘using... hands and eyes to locate the cracks in the surface and the gaps in the texture of the wood at which we could apply our skill of chopping (2009, 204). The skill of cutting in this instance may be said to be located in going through the cracks and ‘exposing the gaps and voids that are... part of the world as such’ (2009, 204). In the Baigachak, as in inner Mongolia, skill was not a generalized capacity but recognized as exceptional ability that a few were endowed with. Gopal, who was showing me the cart he had fashioned, was well-known for his skill with carpentering, music, and electrical work. On one occasion, he was called by villagers to investigate a fault in the lone transponder that served the village inadequately with electricity. A group of men watched as he shimmied up the pole and fiddled around with wires in a manner that looked to me to be extremely dangerous. A Gond neighbour commented to me, “Don’t worry madam, he is skilled (*chatur hai*), he won’t hurt himself”. Skillfulness was

³⁹ See also Marilyn Strathern, “Cutting the Network.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) no. 2 (September, 1996): 517-535.

absorbed into the ordinary in ways not reducible to rehearsed stereotypes about how Baigas were particularly skilled in the ways of the forest.

Pedersen emphasizes creative cutting and the ‘labor of division’ to show that differentiation, creating distances and gaps, and severing are sometimes necessary to enable relations between entities, something that the shamanic gown with all its layers and folds makes possible by keeping shamans, spirit and human worlds distinct. In the chopping of fresh wood, even as the expectation not to chop wood is rehearsed, we discern the cracks and faultlines in the discursive and political practices that attempt to refashion tribal communities into appropriately ethical, environmental subjects.

I further describe the carrying of wood to markets to expand on this theme of differentiation. A group of women would assemble, usually on Wednesdays to walk to Bamhni, 13 kilometers away (see map) bearing between 10-15 kilos of firewood, which would sell at about 50Rs (less than a dollar) a bundle. When we each cross the fields and reach the river, we are joined by women from a different neighborhood. The women greet each other, set down their wood piles, adjust their food bundles, securely attach their babies to themselves with their shawls, help each other hoist the wood bundles on to their heads, and set off. We splash across the river and then start ascending the forest. Badhiya’s family dog accompanies us, and another dog from her mother’s family. There is much shooing and abusing of the dogs. ‘They are Baiga dogs’, says Bhadiya in exasperation, ‘they will fight’. I asked her why she keeps a dog, and she tells me they keep spirits and thieves (*chor-chandaal*) away. “Life is tiring”, remarks a neighbour from another hamlet. “And if we walk together, it lessens the tiredness a bit”. The women discuss what they will buy in the market, providing they are paid what they are owed from previous sales. “I will buy slippers, I need new ones for school,” announces Gondiya. “She wants slippers”, retorts Bhadiya. “Our

ancestors walked barefoot, *didi*, and I still walk barefoot. Now our youngsters want to wear leather and things, manufactured by impure means”.

We reach a clearing where the women rest their loads and disappear behind some bushes. One of the women hums a *karma*⁴⁰, “*phool maya lage re*”, which I record. There is much laughter around my recording machine. The flowers have bloomed in many days, I feel *maya* for them...

Eating and drinking give me no pleasure anymore,
Give me no pleasure.
Life is but for two days,
Who knows, if this homestead will remain, tomorrow
I feel *maya* for these flowers
That have bloomed after many days
We have only been two days to cut wood
And where do you think you are going...to pluck
The flowers, that I feel *maya* for,
That have bloomed after many days..
Let us go and cut bamboo, but there isn't any bamboo...
What then should we cut?
Should we just cut the axe, my dear?
Because there is no bamboo.

The song about cutting the forest, awaiting its resurgence, pondering its depletion, and cutting the axe that cuts the forest, cut the women's walk in two. Before the song we were walking on an undulating terrain of steep forests and rolling fields. After the song, we resumed the second part of our walk which was on a long straight tarred road to Bamhni. Here there were no undulations but vehicular traffic that constantly forced the walkers off the road on to the fields by the side. The recording itself was cut by the sound of a rushing wind, much squealing and laughter, and Badhiya trying to shush her crying toddler, distracting him with sounds of a honking bus. The network of roads that the state had laid out to connect remote villages to markets and administrative centers was popularly held to have

⁴⁰ Musical form widespread in this region.

‘modernized’ and ‘developed’ ‘these forest dwellers’, by improving their access to primary healthcare, education, sanitation, to the state⁴¹. But what these roads also achieved was to bring these villages within reach of the state and private traders, primarily for easy access to cheap labour and as markets for cheap manufactured goods. Villagers themselves used roads strategically to access the goods, services and benefits that the state had made available. Transport (even at ten rupees a day), was expensive, and people often preferred to walk or take short cuts through the forest. When it comes to carrying headloads of firewood, it is actually preferable to take forest paths where one is less likely to encounter officials and questioning. When Bhadiya tries to distract her toddler with the sound of the horn, it points to the nextness of such modern means and conveniences, but also to their strangeness and inaccessibility. In the chopping of wood, its daily use for diverse domestic purposes, the activity of storytelling, where words and woodsmoke fuse to generate an account of daily doing, the familiar sight of lines of Baiga women bearing headloads, and in its concealment within the rafters of a ceiling, we are able to argue that something like form is generated and held in place, if only ephemerally, dispersed, cut and threaded by discourses and technologies of state and market, and familiar social relations.

In this chapter, I try to offer a different perspective on forest-dwelling communities’ relationship with their neighboring forests. I try to capture through a close description of movement and form, the perception of the forest as a kind of sensory knowing. Moving away from older, structuralist understandings of nature as offering a model for cultural categories, as well as revisiting the debates on ontological fixity and fluidity, I show instead on how a shared form of life is produced in the course of collective interactions with subsistence

⁴¹ Recent state efforts to curtail ‘Naxal’ or insurgent activity in tribal areas has involved heavy investments in road building in neighboring Chhattisgarh and Orissa. It is believed that a road infrastructure will render tribal areas transparent, as opposed to concealed by forests.

environments. In the process, I complicate Ingold's 'dwelling perspective', deployed in a distinctively South Asian, tropical forest setting, asking how perception emerges from ephemeral moments of task-oriented immersion in one's environment, that nonetheless does not allow practitioners of these tasks to forget that their access is always constrained and under threat, and the products of their labor on the forest, alienable. The next chapter focuses on the other significant resource of tribal livelihood, land, where anxieties of alienation suffuse everyday life in a much sharper way. How do we imagine indigenous connectedness to the land in such circumstances?

CHAPTER 2

Fluid Land: The Perceptual Horizons of Possession and Property

“Just five more acres, five more, and my family will be secure.” I was accompanying my host, Sukhram, on his morning perambulations along village paths and fields, when he said these words, shading his eyes and pointing with his stick towards the forest that bounded the neat patchwork of Madagaur’s fields. We were discussing the *van kanoon*, as villagers called the Forest Rights Act (FRA)⁴², India’s law seeking to vest forest-dwellers, scheduled tribes and other marginal, forest-dependent people with tenurial rights to tracts of forest land. The village of Madagaur was a ‘revenue village’⁴³; its scattered hamlets (*tolas*) interspersed with privately farmed fields were bounded on three sides by Sal forests. Inhabitants of the different hamlets, Baiga, Gond and Ahir, cultivated their own smallholdings, but Baigas especially, also cultivated tracts of land in the surrounding forests in addition to their privately farmed lands. Many of them had now abandoned these, facing accusations of encroachment from other village residents and harassment from forest officials. But the FRA had rekindled interest in laying claims to this land, and villagers met sporadically under the aegis of Ekta Parishad to discuss strategies and tactics by which they might reactivate their lapsed claims⁴⁴.

Village accounts of land were full of stories of the misappropriation of lands by neighbors. While the forest was, in some senses, perceived as a domain of state control that villagers could more or less equally access for their daily needs, the ambiguously demarcated lands surrounding the village were the subject of many ownership and encroachment disputes and the source of intra

⁴² Full title of the Act: The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2007, hereafter referred to by its shorter title, The Forest Rights Act or FRA.

⁴³ ‘Revenue villages’ are those which have been ‘settled’ since colonial times for revenue assessment purposes, their fields titled, and boundaries demarcated in colonial revenue records. In contrast, ‘forest villages’ are often unrecorded settlements or habitations that fall within state forest boundaries.

⁴⁴ In certain other villages in the sub-district of Samnapur, claims-making followed the procedures set out under the Rules of the Act, in Madagaur, attempts to secure claims to forest land remained only uncertainly tethered to legal discourse, relying more on memories of previously farmed lands, occasional meetings and sporadic incursions into the forest areas immediately abutting the village fields.

and inter-village conflict and animosity. This was not entirely surprising, for the revenue and forest departments, who had overlapping jurisdiction over non-village lands, had a long history of issuing temporary leases and titles to lands surrounding the village boundary and even overlooking ‘encroachments’ and incursions into the forest. To complicate matters, Ekta Parishad, the land rights group that facilitated my introduction to the field, had intervened in the landholding patterns in the region, encouraging villagers to ‘capture’ (*kabzaa karna, pakadna*) land in the unoccupied lands and forest areas adjoining their villages. These ‘caught’ or ‘captured’ lands were what forest officials and other villagers called *atikraman waali zameen* or encroached land. The result was a patchwork of claims and counter-claims over non-village and forest lands that conflicted with the statutory status of these lands (which was not clear anyway), and had to be settled or remain unsettled, and renegotiated periodically among the villagers themselves.

This chapter analyses the logics of ownership and possession that were invoked in staking competing claims to legitimacy over these ambiguously demarcated lands, to show how land bound neighboring groups in relationships of ‘agonistic intimacy’ (Singh 2011), complicating received narratives of adivasi attachments to land. How, under conditions of land scarcity, shrinking access to forests, and the uncertainty of ‘agrarian futures,’ did farmers pressure land to ‘do more’, pushing against the limits of its perceived finiteness? How, in this process, did land itself emerge as something more fluid and fungible, a ‘thing-in-action’ embedded in ‘webs of significance,’ not reducible to either its meanings or materialities (Strathern 2009)? By means of this discussion, I attempt to bring a somewhat different perspective to bear on some of the current debates on adivasi or indigenous relationships to land. Accordingly, the first part of the chapter investigates a land dispute that embroiled the Baigas and Ahirs of Madagaur village in extended relationships of cooperation, reciprocity and animosity. The second part of the chapter follows a landless couple into the forest as they attempt to point out their parcels of land, evoking the idea of ‘illusory property’ (Rose 1994) in the enactment of claims.

Adivasis and dispossession

Dispossession and displacement have been key *leitmotifs* in postcolonial adivasi experience and subjectivity. Discussions on contemporary land struggles in India have focussed on the social, legal and political conflicts around acquiring land as the necessary cost of economic growth under capitalism, euphemistically called ‘development’ (D’Costa and Chakravarty; Bannerjee et al. 2007; Chakravarty 2013), and the devastating consequences for the land-dependent poor. These debates focus almost exclusively on dispossession and land alienation and the politics of rehabilitation, compensation and resistance (Fernandes 2007; Nilsen 2010; Levien 2013). Much scholarly, activist and journalistic writing has focussed on the logics of eminent domain that rationalize state-led expropriation, and the unpacking of laws such as colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, that facilitate state and corporate takeover of private farmlands (Fernandes 1998; Ghatak and Ghosh 2011; Ramanathan 2011). In their recent volume ‘The Land Question in India’, D’Costa and Chakravarty argue that theories of ‘primitive accumulation’, which see expropriation as the necessary condition for the development of a mature capitalist order, correspond to the practices of an earlier development-led state (D’Costa and Chakravarty 2017). The authors argue that this explanation does not suffice for the kinds of dispossession observed under neoliberalism, and that newer theories are required to explain the forms of ‘class redistribution’ that are now at stake. The sharp increase in demand for land has disproportionately affected peasant communities due to their ‘multiple and intimate connections with land and natural resources, particularly forest resources...’ (D’Costa and Chakravarty 2017, 176). Following Harvey (2005), Levien (2013) and Nilsen (2010) describe the unequal distribution of costs and benefits and the displacement of adivasi populations in large river valley projects as instances of ‘accumulation by dispossession’.

Adivasi dispossession and alienation from land is widely traced back to the unequal terms of their incorporation into colonial and postcolonial economy, beginning with colonial agrarian land settlements and forest enclosures (Rangarajan 1996; Savyasaachi 1998; Prasad 2003). In the

post-independence period, fortress conservation, and the forcible acquisition of land for various infrastructural, industrial and developmental purposes under draconian forest and land acquisition laws led to both scholarly and activist documentation of ‘development-induced displacement’ (Fairbairn et al. 2014). Over the last two decades, displacement due to dam building, roads and other infrastructure projects, mega-mining, and newer forms of ‘green grab’ have refocussed scholarly and activist inquiries into land conflicts.

Anthropologists and ecological historians studying forests, displacement and resettlement have questioned monolithic constructions of state power and complicated the narrative of adivasi dispossession by showing that state power is constrained, limited and frustrated in its reach and legibility— for instance, in his classic work on enclosure of the central provinces, Mahesh Rangarajan nuances the problematic of whether colonialism constituted a ‘watershed’ in Indian ecological history, by showing that customary practices and uses of forests and landscapes that enjoy longstanding legitimacy are not supplanted and replaced so easily (Rangarajan 1996). In his seminal study of colonial forest and land management in eastern India, Sivaramakrishnan shows how ‘bio-physical processes and environmental change’ as well as the subsistence and migratory practices of land-users, and the supply and demand for agricultural labor, ‘imposed their own logic on resource management strategies’ and rendered contingent, processes of statemaking in the Janglemahals region (Sivaramakrishnan 1999, xv, 49, 82-85). In this chapter, I show how the ambivalence in statutory demarcations of common lands, the ‘fuzziness’ of boundaries between official categories such as reserve forest, protected forest, revenue land, and waste land, come to feed into villagers’ own understandings and subversions of these classifications. The institutional frameworks that remained so opaque to most users of forests, fields and common lands, nonetheless thoroughly structured the local habitus of resource use, even as they allowed for some fluidity of meaning, use and access.

Ironically, both the colonial and the postcolonial state have also followed a policy of paternalistic protectionism towards adivasi communities, granting, through various legislative means, exceptional status to tribal lands (Savyasaachi 1998). ‘Aboriginal’ areas and tracts were designated ‘excluded and partially excluded areas’ under the Government of India Act of 1935, under administrative control of a Governor and exempt from the direct control of Provincial and Federal legislature. This was both a policy of protectionism towards what was perceived as the cultural distinctiveness of tribal communities, and of the pacification of unreclaimed peoples to quell tendencies to revolt and rebellion (Damodaran 2006; Singh 1992; Savyasaachi 1998). The administration of these areas was further debated in the Constituent Assembly Debates at the time of India’s independence. This resulted in the notification of ‘Scheduled Areas’ with specific provisions for administering them through a detailed constitutional mandate designed to protect against alienation of land to non-tribals, indebtedness at the hands of moneylenders and landowners (Kapila 2008; Upadhyay 2010). The special constitutional status granted to tribal communities in the form of their ‘scheduling’ in specific areas has not prevented large-scale dispossession and displacement for various developmental and industrial projects. The enactment of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act of 1996 (PESA) and subsequently, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forests Rights) Act in 2006, were especially aimed at land and forest-dependent adivasis, to provide greater autonomy and control over the use and disposal of their environmental resources by decentralizing and devolving governance and administration in these areas, and recognizing traditional and customary governance and resource-use practices (Gill 2017).

The relationship between adivasis and land is an ‘important feature of indigeneity globally’, argues Tania Li, saying further that indigeneity is defined as ‘the permanent attachment of a group of people to a fixed area of land in a way that marks them as culturally distinct’ (Li 1996; 2010, p. 385). Colonial as well as postcolonial attempts to prevent alienation of adivasi landholdings may

be seen as efforts to protect this attachment. The ‘management of dispossession’ by states and other actors, takes the form of the ‘attribution of cultural difference, emphasizing the unique vulnerability and special virtue of the group to be protected and their intrinsic attachment to their land’ (Li 2010, 386). Li argues that while attachment to land in the form of some kind of collective tenure might make sense for pastoralism or hunter-gather communities, it is less common for farming communities, except under conditions of land scarcity and imminent threat of alienation by market forces, in which case people may collectively band together and device rules that restrict and regulate the use and distribution of land⁴⁵. These rules are ‘culturally elaborated’ precisely because they are often breached, and vulnerable to collapse as market pressures intensify (Boomgard 1991). In their effort to protect vulnerable communities against commodification of land, Li argues, top down managers and governors, ‘have sometimes confirmed and consolidated popular practices designed for self-protection...’ (Li 2010, 386). But just as often, Li notes, they impose forms of protection that farmers do not want or might want but cannot sustain’ (2010, 386). Moreover, in their efforts to protect the interests of agrarian communities, community itself is represented as a site of consensus and sustainable resource management (Li 1996)⁴⁶.

This was very much in evidence in the work of Ekta Parishad, the grassroots collective of land-based people’s struggles, through whom I was introduced to Dindori district. All through my fieldwork, the leaders of the movement as well as its field level staff were preoccupied with mobilizing villagers for the great people’s land march (*Jana Satyagraha*), which was held in October 2012. In the EP meetings and rallies I attended, in Delhi, Bhopal and Jhansi, and locally in Dindori, the activists were determined to deploy the march, the long physical walk from the Madhya Pradesh state capital, Bhopal, to New Delhi, as a ‘performance of dispossession’ (Butler

⁴⁵ Such as, for instance, the ‘closed corporate peasant community’ described by Eric Wolf for Mesoamerica (Wolf 1957).

⁴⁶ As I noted in the introduction, anthropologists such as Baviskar (1987, 1995) and Shah (2010) have stressed critiques of such notions of community and attachment that emerge from local people themselves.

and Athanasiou 2013). For this, it was necessary to repeatedly assert, by means of speeches, songs and slogans, the primordial ties of community to land. In local, village-level meetings, EP members were urged to put aside '*Ek Mutthi Chawal*' (a fistful of rice), every day, as a symbolic gesture to remind members that they would have to take time out, a month, from the agricultural season to attend the land march, and that they had to save and conserve money and grain so that their families could sustain themselves during that period. The ritual symbolism and solemnity that attended the putting aside of this rice in a *kalash* (mud pot), was intended as a reminder of the link between the produce of the land and the survival of the community. In the EP village meetings that I attended, land or *zameen* circulated as a recognizable yet curiously disembodied signifier, a rhetorical device that performed the function of reminding villagers of what they stood to lose under the combined pressure from the state and corporate capital, unless they walked together to fight these forces. In EP mobilization meetings, the struggle for land (*zameen ka sangharsh*, *zameen ki ladaai*) was deified, as was P.V. Rajagopal, the movement's leader.

In the villages where EP had an ongoing and active presence, its members formed a group or 'samooch' that met roughly every fortnight to discuss issues relating to land and forest claims. I regularly attended these meetings in the village of Madagaur, where I conducted long-term fieldwork. The male heads of about 12 families, mostly from the two Baiga tolas, and one Gond, and one Kol family, formed the core membership of the group. But as I spent more time in the village, I was made aware of gaps and fissures in Ekta Parishad's representations of community and the fractured alliances and antagonisms that individuals and groups forged over land. Non E-P villagers accused E-P members (predominantly Baiga) of atikraman or encroachment on to grazing and forest land. Simmering animosities between E-P and non-EP villagers sometimes flared up into full-blown conflagrations necessitating interventions by officials and police. In tracking one such conflict, I realized that the communal attachment to land envisaged by Ekta Parishad differed greatly from the shifting codes and rules negotiated amongst villagers themselves.

Following Hall, Hirsch and Li (2014), this discussion thus revisits dispossession as *exclusion*, focussing particularly on the domain of ‘intimate exclusions,’ the exclusion of access by social intimates. Specifically, I describe *practices of land-making* and *enactments of property* by which certain groups of villagers seek to retain lands within their control, excluding other members of the village community from the benefits from this land, in the process constantly re-negotiating both the meanings of the land and their relationships with each other. In their excellent discussion of land as an *excludable* resource, Hall Hirsch and Li discuss what they call ‘exclusion’s double edge’— that is, exclusion is distinct from dispossession in that it is something both *negative* and *ameliorable* (2014, 8). Reserving or enclosing land for access by some and for certain purposes, necessarily means that it is unavailable *to* and *for* others. The villagers embroiled in these extended disputes certainly attempted to exclude each other, but claims over land remained always temporary and tenuous, shifting with whoever was able to sustain a narrative of possession. I explore the possibility that this had something to do with the kind of land itself, which was essentially encroached upon land. With its connotations of fuzzy boundaries, illegality, temporal and categorical instability, encroachment has the potential to render unstable the categorical and spatial fixity that comes to attach to land. Clearing makes ‘land’ of forests, but also, forests reclaim ‘land’ if left untended or unclaimed. Not only do people ‘encroach’ but so also does the state with its statutory and material practices of classification and demarcation, as do ‘natural’ entities such as weeds, crops, soils and water, outrunning human-made boundaries. Encroachment thus pressures the category land, imagined as the finite, material, immobile resource par excellence, tied up in clear market and property regimes, into a more fungible resource, subject to multiple meanings, interpretations and significations.

The second part of the chapter, in which a landless couple share their aspirations for land, asks: what defines possession, what acts are necessary to confirm and confer possession? Saying and seeing, orality and visuality, emerge as two modes of enacting claims to possession, that aspire

to legal recognition if they do not always not guarantee stable property rights. Oral and written statements, as well as visual signs such as bunds, structures, and improvements to land also count as evidence of occupation in the Rules of the FRA. Looking closely at such non-sovereign, and ultimately ineffectual modes of claiming possession, the chapter does three things: One, following Ribot and Peluso (2003), it points to how people may have *access* to land without possessing formal property rights, something elided in the overwhelming focus on dispossession as the dominant mode of land alienation; two, by situating the question of land claims in the flux of the everyday, in the context of anxieties around the shortage of land, its dwindling productivity and uncertain ‘agrarian futures’, it asks how villagers make land ‘do more’ pushing against its limits and finiteness, land as a thing-in-action, embedded in ‘webs of significance’ (strathern). Finally, the chapter by tracing the emergence of individual persons as social selves in the context of disputed lands, I problematize scholarly, activist and policy understandings of indigeneous communities and their attachment to land.

Land use and forest classifications: Madagaur in the context of Madhya Pradesh

Madagaur was about 25 kilometers in a north-westerly direction from the Samnapur, one of the seven administrative sub-divisions of Dindori district. Madagaur itself was divided into two distinct settlements, Madagaur Mal. and Madagaur Raiyyat—the nomenclature corresponded to colonial divisions of the region’s settlements into ‘Malguzari’ villages—that is, villages comprised of landowners, and ryotwari villages, comprising villages settled by tenant farmers. With the formation of the state of Madhya Pradesh in 1956, malguzari and zamindari tenures were abolished, tenancy reforms enacted, and only one class of landholders or ‘bhumiswamis’ recognized. In the present day, the two settlements were administratively independent of one another, with Madagaur Raiyyat (where I did fieldwork) holding its own

quarterly Gram Sabha (Village Council) meetings, and Mal holding its own meetings⁴⁷.

However, both villages came under the panchayat of Sarai, which also included the neighbouring village of Bitanpur⁴⁸. Madagaur Raiyyat (henceforth when I write Madagaur I mean Raiyyat) had a population about 100 households, of which 40 were Baiga, 37 were Gond, 12 were Ahir, 10 were Kol, and one household belonged to a Pandit.

The *misl-bandobast* (revenue settlement) from the year 1989-90 shows that the overwhelming number of landholdings are of less than one hectare— even these holdings are further fragmented among individual family members. It is reasonable to assume further fragmentation over a period of a century⁴⁹. Overall, the records indicate intensively cultivated, unirrigated smallholdings. The 2011-2012 land survey for Madagaur records a total land area of about 200 hectares, of which roughly half is classified ‘government land’ (*shasakiya*) and half as ‘private land’ (*niji*). The following land classifications are recorded: Village lands (*abadi*): 3.8740 ha; Grazing grounds (*charagah*): 3.840 ha; Current fallows (*chaalu padti*): 9.490 ha; Unsown area (*niraboya kshetra*): 118.120 ha. Double-cropped area (*dufasli*): 22.190 ha; fallows (between 2 and 5 years): 2.210 ha; fallows (greater than five years): 2.210 ha; surface water (*bhuja*): 11.480 ha; easements, paths (*rasta*): 3.320 ha; Forests (*van*): 17.320 ha. The major crops sown are recorded as paddy, wheat, corn, mustard, chickpea, a variety of pulses and oilseeds, and small millets *kodon* and *kutki*. These

⁴⁷ The more prosperous Gond and Ahir residents of Madagaur mal, with whom I occasionally conversed, said that with the decline of ‘malguzari pratha’, and the Employment Guarantee Act, it had become increasingly expensive to get Baigas from the Raiyyat to work on their fields. The collapsing of two state actions separated by such a vast gulf in time was dubious, but I understood it in the spirit of other comments made about the Baiga as a lowly caste, recalcitrant to improvement, who were now pampered by the state by being given ‘aadin jan jati’ status (Primitive Tribal Group).

⁴⁸ Dindori is a declared Scheduled Area under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The district is divided into seven administrative blocks: Dindori, Shahpura, Anuppur, Mehedwani, Karanjia, Bajag and Samnapur. My fieldwork was conducted in the administrative sub-district of Samnapur. Dindori, an overwhelmingly rural area, comprised 924 villages divided between 323 administrative clusters known as ‘Gram Panchayats’ (District Census Handbook, Census 2011).

⁴⁹ Saradindu Bose, *Changing pattern of land use among the Baiga of Madhya Pradesh*. Anthropological Survey of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India, 1987.

classifications do not correspond exactly with those laid down in the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code of 1959 which orders all private and common property arrangements pertaining to non-urban, mainly agricultural land in the state (MP Land Revenue Code, Ramanathan in Jha 2002). The Code divides all lands into ‘occupied’ and ‘unoccupied’ lands, with a rather confusing sub-ordering of lands⁵⁰. ‘Occupied’ land is all lands in a village which are not ‘abadi,’ or lands held by a ‘bhumiswami’ or tenant or government lessee. In other words, lands that people cultivate, or build their homesteads on. Unoccupied land is, self-evidently, land that is not ‘occupied’ in this way. Furthermore, Madhya Pradesh was one of the early states to codify *nistari* rights in common lands: *Nistar* is the right to obtain the necessities of life⁵¹. The 1929 Nistar Patrak (document recording nistari rights) for Madagaur records the following rights: fodder, cremation ground, gaathan, khalihan (enclosures); bazaar area; place for disposing carcasses and skinning; manure pits; land for schools, playgrounds, gardens and meeting and fairgrounds; roads, paths and gullies; right to gather soil, stones, pebbles and gravel for daily use; rights to ponds, streams, lakes for irrigation and other uses; fruit-bearing trees; fishing rights. The land set apart for communal use, especially nistar, is carved out of unoccupied land and cannot be converted to any other purpose without the consent of villagers by a process laid out in the code. Aside from communal use land, the *wajib-ul-arj* document records customary and easementary rights, “the record of customs in each village in reference to the right to irrigation or right of way or other easementary right and the right to fishing” (Ramanathan 2002). Customary rights, or *wajib-ul-arz haq*, pertained to occupied lands, rather than unoccupied. “Modifications can only happen when all persons interested request this, or when the court intervenes to rule on an existing entry, or

⁵⁰ For details of land classification under the MPLRC (1959), I rely on Ramanathan (2002).

⁵¹ That specifies in particular: a) the terms and conditions on which grazing cattle in the village shall be permitted, and b) the terms and conditions on which, and the extent to which any resident may obtain wood, timber, fuel, small stones, gravel, minor minerals and any other forest produce.

the Collector decides, say, to extend the grazing lands of one village into another” (Ramanathan 2002, 206). So, for instance, in the context of nistar, a complaint I heard frequently was - “the state has eaten all our nistari products (*nistaari ka samaan*) even mushrooms, murum-kankar (gravel and stones) and fuelwood”. However, conflicts relating to grazing rights involved other villages, especially Mohti, with whom villagers were locked in a long-term quarrel over encroaching on their grazing lands. A further complication is introduced when areas adjoining villages are designated by official notification as ‘forests’, and, with that one act of judicial fiat, brought directly under state control⁵². Prior to 1951, different classes of forests prevailed in the Central Provinces, with *malguzari* and protected forests in particular, being designated to meet village needs (Buch 1991; Ramanathan 1997; Rangarajan 1996). With the abolition of proprietary rights in 1951, the legal status of these forests was altered, but without either the Revenue Department or the Forest Department owning responsibility or guardianship of them. In this ‘administrative interregnum’ between 1951 and 1961 when forests were transferred to the Forest Department, there was extensive destruction of nistari forests (Buch 1991, 41). The confusion between revenue and forest department jurisdiction is particularly acute in the case of MP (Sarin 2014) and the result was a classificatory ambiguity in forests meant for villagers’ use, now called ‘orange areas’. The ramifications of this confusion persist to this day.

“Are these PF (protected forest), RF (reserved forest), *patwari jangal* (revenue forest), or *chhote jhhar ke jangal* (small tree forest)?” Villagers would ask in frustration, during meetings.

“Soon it will become illegal to take a walk in the forests with our implements, the rate at which *sarkaarikaran* (statization) is happening,” Sukhram would remark.

“It is all ‘sarkaari jangal’ (state forest)” Mangal, a sage elder, would counter.

⁵² The history of colonial and postcolonial forest enclosure legislation, and the resultant erosion of proprietary and use rights of forest-dwellers, especially with reference to the Madhya Pradesh and the Baigachak region, will be discussed in greater detail in the Introduction to the dissertation.

The maps for Madagaur village told yet another story. The revenue map for Madagaur village (attached) shows a densely plotted grid of private fields with a south-westerly orientation surrounded by a vast undifferentiated and unmarked area with no boundaries, labelled, fascinatingly enough, “Jangal Sarkaar”⁵³. The term indexes that this is forest area under state control but carries ominous overtones of rule, sovereignty and domain over a vast territory. The revenue map suggests an absolute binary - village, and forest. The village lands are plotted and numbered, forest department territory is indicated only by a vast white blankness. Contrary to the revenue map, the forest department ‘compartment map’ (attached) is contained within a letter-size sheet depicting the forests around Madagaur as a grid, with about 425 hectares demarcated as Madagaur’s ‘compartment’⁵⁴. I mention this to highlight that the village had a presence both in the revenue department’s official record, and in the forest department’s and that each map reflected its own department’s preoccupation— the revenue map was interested in labelling the plots with numbers that would correspond to the land record, and the forest department map was interested in delimiting the precise acreage that a village could claim as its ‘village forest’. Contrary to both maps, the lands surrounding the village were hilly and undulating, with an uneven distribution of vegetation and brisk human traffic, with overlapping patterns of use that brought villagers into conflict with the state and with each other. While this did not affect the day-to-day work of gathering forest produce and other subsistence materials, tensions arose over grazing rights and when it came to claiming land, especially land already burdened with the ambiguity of classification.

⁵³ I am grateful to Chitra Venkatramani for helping me piece together and decode this map.

⁵⁴ Forests are divided into several administrative sub-divisions. Madhya Pradesh consists of 16 working circles, (Dindori forests came under the Jabalpur working circle), further sub-divided into territorial divisions, sub-divisions, forest ranges, sub-ranges, and several thousand ‘beats’ which comprised several compartments. There were 2 or 3 beat guards in charge of a cluster of compartments. The the patwari, the beat guard was the face of the forest government most frequently encountered by villagers.

Villagers constantly debated land classifications and ways to increase their holdings, both in the sense of bringing more acreage under private ownership and in searching for innovative ways to increasing the productivity of existing holdings. They sometimes planted two crops on land that could barely support a single crop, or planted two different crops on the same patch of earth during a single season, depending on the land's undulations, and its capacity for drainage. When a crop was ruined due to excessive rains or frost, there would be a scramble amongst villagers to avail of compensation. They held meetings on how to secure watershed programs that would benefit their hamlet the most, and debated whether or not to start dedicating lands to cash crops like soyabean. In addition, inhabitants kept a keen eye on their neighbors' land dealings— who got their land demarcated by the patwari,⁵⁵ which family patriarch was being pressured to divide up his lands among his sons, who was squatting on someone else's land and why, and who was landless and how it affected their status in the village. They speculated over land categories - 'van zameen', 'ghaas zameen', 'awadi zameen,' strategizing how to 'pull' or 'catch' land from one category to another - "*jangal ko awadi mein laana hai*" - "we have to bring/convert forest into awadi, or village land". Among the adult males of the Baiga hamlet where I took up residence, the shortage of land and enclosure of forests was a frequent topic of conversation. Mole, Sukhram's neighbour, nephew and hardworking farmer, who would drop by in the evenings to chat with his uncle, said: "Every family in the next generation will need at least one person in a *karamchhari naukri* (an official job or position). Just living off the land, (*kheti* - farming) won't suffice". Thus, a sense that future security was tied to landholdings was diffuse in everyday life.

⁵⁵ The last in the hierarchy of revenue officials, and the everyday, immediate face of the state with whom villagers interacted most frequently.

Ekta Parishad, the land rights NGO that had facilitated my introduction to the field and shaped much of my early understanding of land and forest issues in the region, had intervened in the pattern of land distribution in the area, having urged villagers, in the late '80s and early nineties, to clear and cultivate unoccupied lands surrounding villages. Ekta Parishad activists would lead their meetings with the slogans:

“Jo zameen sarkaari hai, who zameen humaari hai!” –Land that belongs to the state, is land that is ours to take!
“Jal, Jangal aur Zameen, yeh ho janta ke aadheen!” - Water, forests and this land, let these be in the people's hands!

Ekta Parishad's activities were treated with deep suspicion by officials and its staff accused of inciting villagers into rebellion against the forest and revenue departments. The group of active Ekta Parishad members in any village was called a 'samooch'. Within the village too, the land-related activities of Ekta Parishad members, primarily comprised of Baigas, were treated with suspicion by other villagers who would say that the samooch-wallahs would encroach on lands at the first opportunity. Ekta Parishad is a voluntary organization based out of the Madhya Pradesh state capital Bhopal, that has long been active in national debates on land security for the rural poor. At the time of fieldwork, EP activists in Dindori were busy trying to rally participation for a month-long march, a *padyaatra* called the *Jan Satyagraha*, which translated as “people's march for truth”. The ambition of this march was to gather rural, land-dependent and landless agriculturalists and laborers from different states in India and collectively walk from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh to India's capital, New Delhi, a distance of 326 kilometers). The journey would take a month to complete and the idea was to gather widespread public support and pressure the government to implement speedy reform in land legislation in the country. To coordinate mobilization activities across different states the movement had evolved a tiered structure of communication between P.V. Rajagopal (Rajaji), a veteran land rights activist based in

Bhopal and activists and fieldworkers based in various rural areas where land dispossession or alienation was perceived to be an imminent or chronic threat. Dindori, a forested, tribal-dominated area in eastern Madhya Pradesh was a key site for Ekta Parishad's political activities. In the landscape of development NGOs who divided up the area jurisdictionally in terms of the problems that afflicted it, from 'livelihood' to 'hunger' to 'women's empowerment' and 'forest rights', Ekta Parishad activists were distinguished by their allegiance to land issues: '*zameen waale*', local officials called them, or more disparagingly, '*atikraman waale*', the encroachment people.

Enactments and Persuasions of property: Disputing disputed land

The plot of land that is the subject of this next section was what 'samooch' members claimed as Ekta Parishad land. Early one morning in June 2011, Sukhram, in whose house I stayed, woke me up at dawn. He told me that EP members from the Baiga hamlet had decided to leave early for the fields to plough the '*samoochik zameen*' (communal land). This was a plot of land about a tenth of a hectare in size, held by the village members of Ekta Parishad and its yield was shared equally amongst them. The previous year, they had been unsuccessful in protecting it from being claimed by rival Ahir claimants who claimed that the field belonged to one of their community. We met at the edge of the forest, where the river ran and women and children bathed, and the fields lay around us in neatly tilled squares. Oxen grazed nearby, and several ploughs lay scattered on the ground. There was a sense of furtiveness about the meeting. Some men stood and chatted, while others squatted, silently chewing tobacco paste. We waited for two more members from Teona Pathra, the more distant Baiga hamlet, to join us, and some of the younger, fierier members started to get impatient.

"They never come on time", remarked Chain Singh. "If they can't be on time, they don't get any portion of the yield," snapped Mole, Sukhram's neighbor. Turning to me—"Do you

think this is of any use, sister? Is there any point to this walk (referring to EP's land march)?

"Will there be an outcome (*nishkarsh*)? Will we get title?" I replied that I didn't know, but that it might be useful to go on the march as they would meet a lot of people from other places and hear them talk about the problems they faced. Sukhram started collecting member contributions of rupees ten each, jotting the contributors' name down on a register. The two latecomers from Teona Pthra joined us, and Mole said: "you're late, have you brought your money? We were about to start without you? Look, if you want to get the benefit of being in the samooh, you have to be on time and pay up your dues. Decide if you're in or out. Also, you need to do hard work (*mehnat*) to claim the fruits".

The two latecomers looked sheepish. We walked a little into the forest, breaching the tree line that separated the village fields. At a weed-covered clearing, the men gathered and conversed about the best way to clear it. The weeds were an intimidating tangle several feet in height and there was nothing to do but to start attacking them, so the men started pushing their way in, slashing at the weeds with their sickles. Mangal and Devlal, the two disabled members of the group, along with children and the lone woman who had joined us after her bath, cleared the weeds on the perimeter. Mangal, moving crab-like on his haunches, showed me with his one good arm, how to slash at the weeds whilst flattening them down with his feet at the same time, and Devlal, who had polio, used a spade to turn the earth at the boundary of the field. Slowly, as the tall weeds were removed and heaped to the sides, a clear plot of earth started to emerge. Sukhram's wife and Mole's mother arrived together, bearing some water and fruit. We took a break and deep swigs of water and resumed work. The sun had already climbed high, and we had to disperse and return to finish the task the next day, also at dawn. There was some tense joking about what the Ahir tola men would do if they found out. On the third day, the men yoked their oxen to the plough and slowly, in single file, started ploughing the field along its perimeter, a couple of the men with their oxen standing out as the rectangle they were tracing grew smaller

and smaller. After the field had been ploughed, Chaiti bai, the lone Gond samoooh member who had attended the meeting, sprinkled manure over the freshly turned earth. It would be ploughed one more time and then planted with rice. Sukhram took out a coconut from his cloth bag and dashed it against a rock. We all consumed a tiny piece as *prasad* or offering. Bhura, a senior member of EP, lit incense and stuck it in the soil next to the rock. “Take a photo with your camera, madam,” said Chain Singh. Then we can get the *patwari* (revenue official) to transfer this land in our name”. Everybody laughed as though this had been a joke. For the next two days, the EP group members rose with the dawn, stealthily made their way to the plot to plough and turn it. On the fourth day, by which time it was already late June and the first rains had made their patchy arrival, Sukhram’s wife and Moleram’s mother accompanied us, and we broadcast paddy seeds over the plot.

A week later, I was told, angry Ahir residents had made their way to Sukhram’s house demanding that the EP members vacate the land. Sukhram narrated the incident:

I asked him [the Ahir]: “Have you worked on the land? Tell me, who has done the work on that land? We cleared it, we tilled it, it is ours! It was all overgrown with weeds when we got there. If it belongs to one of you, show us the title”. Of course, they didn’t have it. He who works the land, tills it, sweats over it, the land belongs to him”. (“*Jo mehnat karey, jotaai karey, khoon paseena bahaaye, uski ho gayi zameen*”).

“How did you resolve the dispute?” I asked. “We had to settle it for now, with the gift of a pig”, said Sukhram. “They say they don’t eat, but whenever there’s need for alcohol or meat, the Baiga tola is where everyone comes”. Seeing my mystified look, Phulwati, Sukhram’s wife, explained: “Such exchanges are common among neighbors” (“*Pados mein aisa udhaari chalta hai*”). Gondiya and Budhram, the two youngest, proceeded to give me a colourful description of the pig-chase that had ensued, and the screams of the protesting pig as it was bundled into a sack, taken away by men from the Ahir community. The pig narrative was a little confusing, and I was unclear if it was strictly in relation to the land dispute, to temporarily pacify a situation

threatening to get out of hand, or part of other circuits of exchange that bound the two hamlets together. Furtive transactions in smaller livestock like pigs or chicken were common between households. Livestock was sometimes ‘borrowed’ for sacrificial purposes, sometimes given in payment for *guniyaayi* (treatment of illness by a Baiga healer), or in exchange for wood or bricks, and sometimes had to be given as offerings to satisfy the appetites of a forest ranger staying overnight (*jangli ko parshaad chadha diya*). Larger livestock were given away only if the owner was heavily indebted and unable to repay in any other way. *Udhaari*, ongoing transactions between neighbors that included small livestock, small sums of money, alcohol, food, and ritual services, were distinguished from *karz* (*karaj uthaana*), which referred to debts/borrowing of significant sums, either from village self-help schemes, government loans, or moneylenders.

Further inquiries unravelled more histories of transactions over this piece of land. When, a few weeks after the sowing, I interviewed Ram Saran, the Ahir neighbour who also claimed the land for his own, he was very bitter. Ram Saran said that the plot of land had been allotted to his father during the ‘*bhumi bantaan*’ (land redistribution) since the 1970s⁵⁶, but his father had never been able to obtain the actual lease/patta for the land, despite repeated, arduous trips to the revenue records office in Dindori. Ram Saran’s father was apparently informed by the record room staff that he would have to have the land properly measured and demarcated by the patwari. Ram Saran said that his father’s life and health were consumed by trying to secure patta for the land and in going between different levels of the revenue officialdom. ‘*Sab ghoskhor hain*’, he said, ‘they are all bribe-takers’. Ram Saran, about Sukhram’s contemporary, had witnessed his father’s struggles to secure title to the land. The family continued to cultivate the land on and off over the years, sowing at least one crop per season. However, when the forest department stepped

⁵⁶ ‘Land reforms’ entailing the enactment of laws abolishing colonial-era tenures, imposing ceilings on amount of landholdings permitted, and the redistribution of surplus land to small, marginal and landless households. The Land Reforms Committee appointed for MP notes that the procedure was fraught with irregularities, protracted litigation, and disputes, and many grants of land were never recognized officially (Jha 2002).

up its plantation and forest farming and biofuels cultivation programs and planted a row of Eucalyptus on the land and it became increasingly difficult to retain a hold on it. Some Baiga families (from EP samooh) had come to Ram Saran's aid by clearing the Eucalyptus plants and taking on collective responsibility in case the forest department harassed Ram Saran. According to Ram Saran, the '*samooh waale*' had come to his aid, but then used this opportunity to do *atikraman*, or occupy the land themselves, continuing to cultivate the land even after the threat from the forest department had receded. When pressed on the question of whether the land had any documentation, Ram Saran claimed that the land had indeed been demarcated and measured and recorded as part of official record, but he was unable to 'get the record out' because the patwari had colluded with the samooh members to hide it— "*samooh waale aur patwari, salaah mein aake record gayab kar dis*" ("the samooh people and the revenue official got together and made the record disappear"). Records of possession such as maps, relevant pages of the *misl-bandobast* (the record of rights document), and property titles or *pattas* were exceedingly hard to procure. Villagers from all over had to travel to the District Collectorate office, which also housed the main revenue records office, by unreliable public transport or on foot, and camp for hours or even overnight in the courtyard, hoping to secure an audience with the revenue official they had come to see. Land records were most often sought to resolve property disputes or to be eligible to claim particular welfare benefits that required proof of land ownership. "We are trying to rationalize, computerize", said the harried clerk at the record room. "Soon everything will be on computer, people will be able to access their records online, no need to come to the Collectorate and gather in crowds and clutter up the hallways." "*Unko bhi suvidha, hum ko bhi suvidha*". "Convenience for them, and for us". This dream of a perfectly digitized bureaucracy seemed a distant one, and in the meantime, '*gayab*' or disappeared or hard-to-obtain *pattas* resembled the misappropriated compensation 'lists' in Matthew Hull's description of land expropriation in the outskirts of Islamabad; forms, files and lists constituted material technologies

of governance, and in their absence statist imaginaries of order and control over landscape were left vulnerable to being re-interpreted, subverted and contested (Hull 2008).

Sukhram proffered a different explanation for the land. He claimed that Ram Saran, in addition to facing constant harassment at the hands of the forest department, had also unofficially mortgaged the land to Sukhram in return for the sum of a few thousand rupees which he hadn't been able to repay. Sukhram and other EP members had 'treated' this land as symbolic Ekta Parishad land, clearing and tending it, fertilizing it, and ploughing and sowing. They enacted their claim by attempting to collectively and ceremonially plough the land each year, and setting apart its yield as a collective fund (kosh) for Ekta Parishad activities. Since this plot of land was not heritable and could be alienated from one or the other party at any moment, rather than legality, which is what title aims to confer, what appeared to be at stake was legitimacy. Each party drew on different logics to assert the legitimacy of their claim over this land. Neither was it clear that the ultimate aim in this story of claims and counter-claims was the securing of ownership through title. So what was it that was being claimed, in this case? What sorts of rights in and to this land were people aiming to realize through these claims?

Canonical, liberal property theory, famously articulated by Locke, has it that private property is created out of the divinely provided commons, first by applying labor (which is inseparably a person's own, his property) to the world of nature. Private property is sanctioned by 'natural law', it is the outcome of the primordial act of appropriation of nature's gifts through the application of labor, because man needs to provide for his necessities. Only subsequently, through the development of positive laws, does a state protect the right to private property. How the world of nature becomes man's own, through property, is because of an even prior relationship of ownership, in which the person and the labor of man is his own, his property. That is, the concept of property and ownership belong to the domain of nature.

In sharp contrast, anthropological accounts see property relationships as *social* relationships, relations to things that suture persons to the social (Hann 1998). There is nothing pre-given about the relationships between persons and things, rather, the manner in which things circulate (or not) in society, specifies the characteristics of both persons and relationships between them. Property regimes thus codify what count as persons or things under specific forms of social, political and economic organization⁵⁷. One can begin with a brief foray into the account of property furnished by Durkheim, for it is explicitly in contradistinction to Locke. Durkheim sees the act of marking out fields for families as primordial acts of delimitation not different from setting apart shares for the gods (Durkheim 2013). Excludability, removal from common use, is what characterizes the property relation proper. Removal from the common, profane universe is of course, also what characterises the sacred. What gives property its moral force, what attends the sense of almost sacred horror at its violation, is not derived from a sense of ‘possessive individualism’ (McPherson 2011), but rather the taboo that attends the violation of the sacred - profane distinction. The location of this is not the individual, but rather, the social. One might think that the sacred character of property is derived from work of tilling the soil, “through which the husbandman communicates *something of the respect of which he himself is the object, of the sanctity which is in him,*” but, in reality, this quality of sacredness resides in the thing itself (Durkheim 1984:180, emphasis mine). That is, the soils, fields, crops are all suffused with sacred potential, which is then specified and set apart by specific acts of marking, such as tilling, bund construction, etc. Once land has thus been made sacred, by being excluded, in order to further appropriate this sacred land for individual use, the sacredness of the fields has to then be displaced, through ritual, sacrificial acts, to its boundaries, and shares carefully apportioned to the gods before they can be apportioned among human beings. That is why, the boundaries of fields

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Shruti Chaganti for making available her conceptual essay, ‘Property and Personhood,’ in which some of these issues are summarized clearly and succinctly. (Chaganti 2014)

are sacred and inviolable. Boundaries demarcate and distinguish groups and clans, and also, ‘gave to family groups smaller than the clan a cohesion and stability that they had not known before’ (Durkheim 2013/1984:184). For Durkheim, private appropriation presupposes a prior collective appropriation, of which it is the derivative, less sacred form. Hence, he makes a distinction between the sacredness of landed property versus the relatively profane character of movable property which can be distanced from its collective origins. In land, however, in the ploughing and tilling of it, the collective is constantly re-enacted and resurrected.

Max Gluckman, coming from a different, more political angle, deconstructs Barotse jurisprudence to argue that nested rights in land are primarily a series of status obligations between the sovereign/chief and his subjects (Gluckman 1965). Property rights are really the ordering of a series of reciprocal claims based on status. Status here means ordered criteria of belonging— to a tribe, a community, a place. The sovereign has the power to dispense rights in territory, which are then protected even from his own re-appropriation. The right of an individual to a thing are thus guaranteed and protected, but what he can do with his ownership is determined by his position in a status hierarchy - the delineation of usufruct rights in his land, the use of trees, the movements of animals, and the rules according to which the yields from lands can be shared. In Gluckman, land and political community have a key correlation - leaving a place/community/village means leaving land and the specific rights in land to which an individual is entitled. Concomitantly, coming into a village automatically guarantees a share in land, with its concomitant status obligations. In both cases, property ownership, especially ownership of landed property is significant for how the individual comes to belong to the social— in Durkheim, the exclusive property relation is the result of the sacred division of society into clans, and the subsequent apportionment of all materials, substances and beings among clans, and for Gluckman, the nature of rights in property are determined and delimited, first and foremost by status.

How can this brief excursion into property doctrines help us decode the scarcity-driven aspirations of Madagaur's villagers? What I found fascinating in the particular dispute I have just gone into is that all of these diverse conceptions of ownership seemed to make their presence felt in some attenuated form. When the Ekta Parishad group ceremonially and collectively ploughed the land, marking the completion of sowing by the lighting of incense and the breaking of a coconut, they were, in effect, declaring the set-apart character of this land, as though saying, "whatever has gone before, this, here, now, this sacred act of ploughing and making boundaries, makes this land ours". Note, also, that they asked the visiting anthropologist to bear witness to this act, to compress and record it by taking a picture and making it visible, acknowledging that their claims would always be nested within the rights granted to them by the state, which was sovereign over all territory, and the only one who could ultimately legitimize claims. Ram Saran, on the other hand, disputed the samooth's actions by claiming to be the 'original possessor' of the land, raising the question of who had been there first (Rose 1994, 13). He said that his claim could be backed by title, which was the product of a different kind of labor relating to the land—the labor of his father in procuring the title, which had been invalidated by the patwari with the samooth's collusion. EP members rubbished the existence of title, claiming that their entitlement drew from their direct physical exertions to improve the land. Ram Saran accused the EP members not just of betraying his trust, which they had gained by defending his land from the forest department, but also abusing the relative strength of their position as a group who had more 'influence' with land and forest authorities. Ram Saran's account destabilized the picture of social of material differentiation in the village that had congealed for me over fieldwork, accustomed as I had become to Baiga self-ascriptions as the group in the village with the least power and the least access to material wealth.

In the absence of a clear statutory classification, the land was thus open to multiple significations. Ram Saran asserted the legitimacy of his claim on the basis that the land had been

allotted to his father. He had sought the assistance of a group perceived to have some resilience against the forest department to protect the plot (though Sukhram claimed that he had mortgaged it to him and permitted him to use and live off the produce of the land), and they had betrayed him and now he was powerless to assert his claim, lacking the necessary documentation. But over time, the land had passed into the trusteeship of the EP ‘group’, who claimed the land for theirs by repeatedly tilling it as a collective. Sukhram invoked the language of ‘possessive individualism’— “whoever labors, to him belongs the land”— but in the actual work of ploughing the land, its meaning was transfigured into something else— the furrowed plot of land became the material, if uncertain, embodiment of the collective, the samooch.

In her influential volume *Property and Persuasion*, the legal scholar Carol Rose has argued that property is more about storytelling, crafting a narrative, than anything else. The illustration I have just provided would appear to support her thesis. Claims of greater legitimacy to this piece of land became a matter of who could sustain their claims over it through stealth, force, subterfuge, or ongoing narratives and enactments of ‘persuasion’ (Rose 1994). Talking about the land made visible an ongoing history of neighborly relations and transactions, shaped by care and reciprocity, as well as economic necessity and mistrust. Hall, Hirsch and Li, in a recent volume on land dispossession in Indonesia, term such incremental acts of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ as ‘intimate exclusions’, where ‘social intimates’ seek to consolidate their small and marginal holdings against each other rather than the state or corporate interests (Hall, Hirsch and Li 2014). Their analysis however, leaves out precisely how intimacy haunts exclusion, never congealing in a sovereign claim of possession that settles decidedly in favour of one rather than the other. EP samooch members relied on Ekta Parishad’s backing as a ‘moral’ organization fighting for the land rights of vulnerable poor; Ram Saran took recourse to his vulnerability inherited from his father, as a land-poor farmer fighting an opaque state machinery and more powerful, influential interest groups. But both parties’ claims had to be constantly re-enacted in

order to remain active, and at different times, one set of claims managed to temporarily exclude another.

Some of the most creative perspectives on how land can be understood in this more expansive way come from ethnographic studies of Melanesian societies⁵⁸. Marilyn Strathern offers a fascinating perspective on this distinction between land as being a finite material resource tied up in clear legal regimes of property, with a distinct market value, and land as a source of multiple significations.⁵⁹ Strathern discusses how land, the paradigmatic ‘tangible asset’ in Western property law, comes also to incorporate an invisible or hidden dimension. Strathern is interested in the contrast that is often mobilized between land as a material, productive resource, and its more expansive sense as a resource with ancestral, cosmological associations. In cases of indigenous land claims globally for instance, such attributes of land are mobilized jointly or in contrast to each other in deciding the priority of claims upon land, its value, compensation for its acquisition etc. Strathern suggests that one way of thinking around this impasse might be to think about land as a ‘*resource that produces resources*,’ to think about its productivity also as a kind of creativity. One could then think of the ‘creations’ of land both in terms of its tangible, mobile, tradeable resources, such as timber or mineral wealth, its horticultural produce, as well as humans and animals who draw spiritual and material nourishment from it. Strathern notes that rather than conceiving of these two senses of land as some kind of anthropological contrast between western and non-western conceptions of property and value, anthropology might help us to retain a sense of context while being able to talk across contrast. Strathern argues that intellectual property law, a branch of law dedicated specifically to protecting creative autonomy including the material

⁵⁸ Please see the volumes: *Transactions and Creations: Property Debates and the Stimulus of Melanesia*, Eric Hirsch and Marilyn Strathern, eds., (New York: Bergham Books, 2004). See also, *Rationales of Ownership*, Lawrence Kalinoe and James Leach, eds., (Sean Kingston Publishing 2004), and *Creative Land*, James Leach, (New York: Bergham Books, 2003).

⁵⁹ Marilyn Strathern, “Land: Intangible or Tangible Property” in *Land Rights*, edited by Timothy Chesters, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

manifestations of creativity (texts, inventions, etc.) might help think about the contrast between tangible and intangible property. That is, thinking about land based on incorporating its *potentiality* as much as its material outputs is something that can inform diverse conceptions of how to arrive at valuation of land. Melanesian modes of thinking about the creativity/productivity of land, Strathern argues, make explicit this play between visible and invisible dimensions of land. For instance, yams, the staple food crop of Papua New Guinea highlanders are ceremonially displayed and staged in heaps during annual food festivals. They are synecdochic of the material productivity of land but also evoke a cluster of affects— masculinity, toil, virility. In other words, yams ceremonially displayed make visible the entire range of creative potential of the land. In Papua New Guinean food displays, ‘people...empower themselves at certain, usually ceremonialized moments by playing on the relationship between intangible creativity and tangible creations’ (Strathern 2009, 32). The concomitant to this expanded conception of land is a similarly expanded relationship between entitlement and labor as undergirding claims to property. The entitlement to the produce of the land comes from entitlement to the land itself, rather than from entitlement to the fruits of labor. But if labor and land are not thought of as separate, but integrated through the shared the work of care, provisioning, tending, and sustaining social relationships, entitlement to the produce (or productivity) of the land come from being embedded in the webs of relationships associated with land, rather than from entitlement to the fruits of labor. (Strathern 2009:26). I would argue that in Madagaur, land, labor as shared work, and social relationships were all entangled, and notions of community contested and enacted, even if not quite in the ways envisaged by the land rights movement working for the land entitlements of the poor.

In Samnapur generally, land was *a resource that produces resources* (Strathern 2009, 35). “*Unke paas resourj hai, humaare paas nahin*” (“‘They’ have ‘resource’, we don’t”), was a phrase villagers used when they described why a different group or village or hamlet had been able to

secure benefits that they themselves hadn't. 'Resource' was a polyvalent term which could mean money, support from officials or local 'big men,' as well as qualities such as resourcefulness, drive and initiative in securing benefits for one's own group, however defined. Moreover, to show land ownership in the form of title was important to avail of several state schemes and benefits. Land ownership was the *route to resources* and also the ground from which resources arose.

Does this help resolve the conundrum of how a gift of an animal temporarily allays the animosity stemming from a longstanding quarrel over land? We can argue that the plot of land to which different groups and individuals in Madagaur claimed entitlement stitched together the moral, material, and potential. Without invoking any particular cosmological or ancestral associations, it bound village residents in uncertain bonds of trust, altruism and antagonism. This was not the equivalent of the Hohfeldian 'jural relations' that created clear claims, entitlements and exclusions over property as an inert thing, but rather, allowed for 'land', a finite material resource, to be transfigured into a 'thing-in-action', embedded in other kinds of exchanges and relationships, material and non-material. Rather than the elaboration of cultural codes as a response to scarcity, we observe what Marshall Sahlins calls 'culture in practice' (Sahlins 2000), the contestation and settling of rules, norms and obligations in the process of the everyday work of life—providing for families and neighborhoods, excluding non-kin, participation in political mobilization, and engaging with tedious officialdom. Land emerges as the moving ground of the activity of daily life.

Viewing, Speaking, Writing, Working: The conceptual and legal bases of possession

On yet another hot summer morning, three years after the collective land tilling, I found myself in the village attending yet another meeting of samoooh members.



Fig. 8. A Gram Sabha meeting in progress.

The members had assembled at the edge of the forest by the river, their usual meeting place. Like most of the other meetings I had attended, the proceedings were slow and desultory, peppered with conversation not quite pertaining to the main agenda, the assembled members told me that interest in samooch activity had dwindled, with people becoming sceptical of its benefits, and the farmers were unable to build consensus among themselves. Threads of topics were picked up and dropped.

Sukhram “The ranger from Bona has been coming around, he wanted to confiscate our implements, our axes. He suspects that two of our boys started the forest fire. I told him: how can you not see who has lit the fire. Of course we will use the forest, if there are trees, of course we will use them. It is the FPC people who are behind this; they corner all the (forest department) work, and all the money. But it is we who know the jungle and need the jungle. It is the ‘aadhaar’, the foundation of our existence, so why would we set fire to it...the forest needs to be saved. So I told the ranger: go ask the others, the *samiti* people, who did it. We won’t give you our implements. The mushrooms are gone, firewood (*jalaau lakdi*) has gone, grazing grounds are gone...all destroyed because of the fire”.

Chain Singh “Why don’t you stand for *Samiti* president, then? Then some work can come our way, also?”
Bhura “Alright, friends, lets discuss the Forest Act (*van kanoon*), how are we supposed to do this, now, how are we to claim? (*Kaise daava karna hai?*)

Sukhram pulled out the *samooch* register, opened it to a fresh page and wrote on top: “*Van zameen jotna hai*”. “*We must plough forest land*”. The assembled members discussed procedure and logistics— money for photographs, caste and domicile certificates, the difficulty of getting signatures from revenue and forest officials.

“We also need to clearly map the areas we are claiming, and get the signature of the revenue official. How do we organize all this?” The villagers turned to Dhansingh, the old EP activist who managed Madagaur as a ‘field’. Dhansingh was often patronized by the younger members of the *samooch* as old and ineffectual, but the older members admonished their disrespect and saw him as an important conduit for information about the organization’s activities in the wider world. On this occasion, facing pointed questions about how the organization could help with navigating the bureaucratic maze of affidavits, photographs and official signatures that was required before land claims even reached the Gram Sabha for ratification, Dhansingh, appearing ill-at-ease and unfamiliar with the procedures, beat a hasty retreat.

The discussion veered to how to bring more of the forest under *awadi* or village land. The assembled men discussed a ‘*bada* line’ (big line) and a ‘*naya* line’ (new line). The ‘*bada* line’ was the boundary separating the forest from village and revenue lands. The *naya* line referred to the newer, eucalyptus plantations. Villagers said that the forest department constantly ‘brought this line down’, that is, by planting newer and newer rows of trees, they extended the forest into the village. What the villagers wanted was to reverse this— for more forest land to be converted to village lands. In the gradual taking stock of available options, villagers had begun to realize that they could claim spaces in the forest under the new *van*

kanoon (forest law). Sukhram asked me: “What do you think, sister? Will the Congress and Rahul Gandhi keep their promise⁶⁰? Will they give us land? Will they fulfil the people’s demands? That is what Rajaji is saying.... ‘*kheti karna hai, kamaana hai, khaana hai*’ (‘farm, earn, eat’). In the time of our grandparents, we could do ‘*manmani kheti*’ [in the forest]...” “just sow and reap, sow and reap”. Then the *angrez* (the British) ‘brought down’ the adivasi from the forests into the plains, (*uthaar dis, samtal zameen ma*), and nationalized the forest (*jangal ka rashtriyakaran kar dis*). And then, there was the Congress....they sold us out (*bech kha daalis*). They didn’t give us titles. So, those who are cleverer and stronger (*chatur, taakat waale*), captured 10...20...acres of land. (I won’t lie, I also caught some land, a few *dishmil* here and there),” Sukhram brought his hand to his throat in a swearing gesture. “But I swear, I only took what I need. Where are the poor to go? (*gareeb aadmi kahaan jaaye?*). *Jahaan mila, wahin kamaa ke khaana hai* (wherever find land, there we try and make a living)”. In the last chapter, I explore how we might understand such statements as forms of appeal to the state. For now, I only wish to make the point that for these villagers, the lofty aims enshrined in the FRA, of protecting forests and biodiversity, were embedded within a horizon of the ‘near future’ (Guyer 2007), in which securing their livelihoods against land scarcity and forest enclosures remained the main concern. In such a context, laying claims to forest land was less a sovereign act of claiming space or territory, than comprised of tentative steps towards securing precarious futures. This chapter wishes to highlight this dimension of tentativeness through problematizing the idea of claiming as a kind of sovereign, decisive action that secures clear possession of landed property imagined as a fixed, limited entity.

“Well, the old times are back now”, said Sukkul. “The government is giving us forest land”. “We have all our ‘*nishaan*’ (markers) said Sukhram. “*Medh munaara, jhaad*

⁶⁰ The last two elected governments of the state of Madhya Pradesh have been formed by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). However, ‘tribal-dominated’ or ‘scheduled areas’ in Madhya Pradesh had known for always voting for candidates from the Congress party. The sitting MLA (Member of the state Legislative Assembly) at the time of my fieldwork was Omkar Singh Markam, a Congress representative.

adi...sab waisa hi hai". (Bunds, rocks, trees, all the markers of our fields are still there").

"What did you grown on that land?" I asked.

"Kodo, kutki, lentil. Its *kamasu* (productive)".

"Why did you leave it?"

"Because of trouble from other villagers and the *junglee-ranger*". *Sangathan nahi ban paaya* (we couldn't stand together as a group). Even today look, out of 30 people, only 10 have come. From now on, if you are not contributing, then you are out".

Sukhram tells Dadulal... "Write the date of today's meeting, make a list of all those who are here". As Dadulal scribbled the names of the ten men present - each put his thumbprint next to his name.

"We have an 'understanding' with the Mohti forester now. They will let us plant some crops there. We should grow what is '*bikasu*' (saleable). Kodo, kutki, raahar. We should get the land-poor in Mohti to join us as well".

I asked to see these plots of land, and was taken into the forest by Sukkal and Badhiya, a couple from the hamlet who were landless and entirely dependent on the sale of forest produce and on wage labor to make ends meet. "Armed with my camera, I followed Sukkul and Badiya and a host of giggling kids. We walked some way into the trees, and soon came upon a vast, patchy clearing, with many trees still standing, and overgrown with tangled barmasiya. The couple walked me through the clearing, pointing here and there, saying,

"We cleared that, and that, and that. Do you see that log of *saaja*?" Then...pulling my gaze with his finger, Sukkal said,

"There...".

"Where"?

"*There*".

"*Where*?"

"Where the tendu is".

I finally spotted a stunted tendu plant in the distance —"Oh, ok. Is that where your land extends to?"

"Yes, I will plant kutki there, and raahar. *Kamasu hai*. It is productive". They pointed out several more 'plots', their index fingers sweeping the air—"That belongs to Gopal's and Sukhram's family," said Badhiya. "That there is Mole and his family's," Each plot was separated by logs and shrubs, the notional counterpart to one family's collective labor on that

land. Some plots were overrun with weeds. “That can be cleared”, said Badhiya. “But look! Our land is clear (*saaf hai*). That’s because we keep coming and tending to it.” I could hear the pride in Badhiya’s voice. She and her husband often had to endure condescending and dismissive attitudes from their neighbors. A field of their own could change things for them.



Fig. 9. Sukkal and Badhiya pointing out their plots of land.

On following Sukkul and Bhadiya’s gaze a bit longer I could distinguish that the trees had been hewed according to a certain pattern alternating fully standing trees with tree stumps that demarcated distinct plots. When Sukkal and Badhiya pointed out the different plots of land, they were seeing something different from what I was seeing. They were not seeing an undistinguished stretch of land marked here and there with fallen logs and trees, trenches and rocks. Each plot represented a different family, the labor of that family. They were seeing fields that could be made to yield *kodo* and *kutki*. They were seeing a possibly different life for themselves.



Fig. 10. Sukkal pointing out his land.

In continuity with her argument about property as a kind of narrative enactment, Carol Rose argues that claims to property can rely on vision, sight or visibility in ways that counteract the critique of vision as necessarily always entailing domination, distancing or objectification. Rose alludes to “ways of seeing property where official laws of property would deny that there is anything even like property,” as ‘illusory property’ (Rose 1994, 290). Illusory property seems an apt term to describe how the Baiga farmers of my acquaintance perceived their sense of ownership over the lands they had tenuously secured in the forest. The relationship of vision to territory here was not the sovereign one of the cartographer or surveyor but the tenuous linkage between the gaze, the pointing hand and the patch of earth whose visibility even was in question. The list of what constituted permissible evidence of occupation in the FRA included pictorial evidence of physical alterations made to the land, like bunds, trenches and furrows as well as graphic markings of structures that might distinguish the land, such as trees or wells. Especially in relation to landed property,

the question becomes, how does possession relate to occupancy? In the context of the FRA, demonstrating occupancy becomes the route to possession. Analysing case law relating to property-related to disputes from early 19th century America, Rose argues that two principles appear to interact, and stand in some tension in adjudicating property claims. One she calls the ‘clear act’ rule, by which is meant a ‘clear act’ that communicates to the world in no uncertain terms, the intention to appropriate. This is akin to a proclamation or declaration, or *notice* (Rose 1994, 12). The second principle suggests a labor theory of property, wherein ownership is a ‘reward to useful labor’ (1994, 13). So, which decides possession? When one stakes a claim through some kind of statement, or declaration of intent to appropriate, or when one actually performs some labor to mark or change or improve the thing over which ownership is being claimed? Rose argues that the two principles might not be exclusive, as might appear at first. “The common law of first possession, in rewarding the one who communicates a claim, does reward useful labor: the useful labor is the very act of speaking clearly and distinctly about one’s claim to property” (Rose 1994, 16). So, if we consider again the instance of Ekta Parishad members ploughing the ‘samoohik’ or community land, the act of ploughing itself was both a ‘clear act,’ communicating to the relevant audience that the land was taken, and, at the same time, a performance of labor. Ram Saran, in contrast, evoked the labor of his father, in making repeated, arduous trips to the revenue office to try and hunt down the title for his land.

Consider the list of evidence proving occupation recognized under the FRA:

a) public documents, Government records such as Gazetteers, Census, survey and settlement reports, maps, satellite imagery, working plans, micro-plans, forest enquiry reports, other forest records, record of rights by whatever name called, pattas or leases, reports of committees and commissions constituted by the government, government orders, notifications, circulars, resolutions; b) government authorized documents such as voter identity card, ration card, passport, house tax receipts, domicile certificates; c) physical attributes such as house, huts, and permanent improvements made to land including levelling, bunds, check dams and the like; d) quasi-judicial and judicial records including court orders and judgements; e) research

studies, documentation of customs and traditions that illustrate the enjoyment of any forest rights and having the force of customary law,...f) any record including maps, record of rights, privileges, concessions, favours, from erstwhile princely states or provinces or other such intermediaries; g) traditional structures establishing antiquity such as wells, burial grounds, sacred places; h) genealogy tracing ancestry to individuals mentioned in earlier land records or recognized as having been legitimate residents of the village at an earlier period of time; i) statement of elders other than claimants, reduced in writing⁶¹.

This list of included evidence suggests that occupation can be inferred and granted recognition from a wide variety of sources, notably, a variety of state-issued documents pertaining to both the residence and domicile status of individuals and to the landscape itself—evidence of physical changes made to the land; as well as genealogical records, and testimonies of village elders. The criterion of notification or a communicative act as a sort of first principle of claiming possession is to be met primarily through writing and the procuring of written records, whereas, the criterion of possession as a reward for useful labor is to be met by visible signs on the landscape— bunds, levelling, constructions sites. However, while visible signs of occupation serve as ‘texts’ communicating appropriation, the written record serves as a visible, tangible evidence of presence, occupation, and labor on the land. In the meeting that I have just described, in fact, throughout the chapter, this primacy of the visual and the written is acknowledged and aspired to, if seldom accomplished. Fences and boundaries markers disappear, fall in, or are transgressed, trees are chopped, rivers dry up. People constantly talk of obtaining ‘records’, of getting lands mapped and measured, of making lists and keeping them safe, of the importance of taking photographs. But lands are farmed and then also abandoned. Lists and names are scrawled on tattered registers, in pencil, or ink that smudges. Claims forms are incomplete, entire sections left blank. Meetings are held, sparsely attended, attendees arrive late, sometimes abandoning the meeting midway.

⁶¹ The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Amendment Rules, 2012.

The form of these meetings aspires to, and draws from, the structure of more formal Gram Sabha meetings, which, according to the FRA, is where claims have to be publicly evaluated and ratified. Re-activating claims and possession requires certain forms of energetic, communal action, which might or might not come to pass. As Sukhram often says, *salaah nahi ban pata*, we are not able to build consensus. These projects of claiming remain tentative, scattered, distracted, unfinished, even they draw their repertoire from the more idealized, legally recognized processes of claiming.

When we got back to the group, the discussion was still under way. “A lot of our land is caught in *peeyap* (PF, or Protected Forest). Some people have ‘*kabzaa*-ed’ revenue land, but we want that land (of ours) that is ‘caught’ in the forest”. In this context, *kabza* was used interchangeably with *pakadna*, or catching. People could ‘catch’ a bit of land here or there, or conversely land could get ‘caught’ within classificatory and physical boundaries. In the context of mosques constructed on illegal lands in urban neighborhoods of Lahore, Pakistan, Naveeda Khan describes how the term *qabza* “(lit. grasp, clutch, seizure, confiscation, occupancy)” has a full semantic range running from violent seizure to the violent usurpation of voice (Khan 2012, 29). In the context that I describe here, *kabza* carries much more tentative overtones of encroachment and imminent dispossession, nonetheless with aspirations to permanency. In that sense, what Khan suggests in the context of mosque-related *qabza* is valid for the land aspirations of rural Indian villagers— that “it has potential to shed light on the ways in which people bind each other up in the context of attempting to undertake a collective project, or the entropy that shadows such projects. In other words it has the potential to teach about the state of striving and the obstacles to it within everyday life...” (Khan, 29).

Sensing my confusion, Sukhram explained that different people have caught land in different places. “*Bade bade logon ka ghaas zameen hai* (the powerful people have captured large tracts of revenue land). They won’t let us claim any of it. So the only

option left for us is the jungle. Main jhooth nahi boloon, (I won't lie), he said, hand to throat. I have also captured land, about 0.5 acres. But I didn't cut any trees for it, only weeds.

Chain Singh: "Ok, then we are together in this. We agree to cultivate our plots in the forest this year (yeh saal...jotai karna hai). We have to decide what to plant there—kodo-kutki or raahar, bewar or plough". Let us write down for each of us, since when have you caught this land? Tell me now, one by one". People started remembering when plots had been caught. "Bisahu took the plot by the mango tree in... '97, was it?"

"Bhura-un caught the one next to the forest pillar"....

Sukhram: "It is not enough to remember. We will have to show kabza (occupation)". And for that we have to plant something. Every man puts in 500 rupees, buys raahar seeds and plants them, so that there is a standing crop by Ahgan (October). All the men agreed that they had a greater chance of retaining the land if they could cultivate a crop that would interest officials in a pay-off. Raahar, (the colloquial pronunciation of arhar lentil) was a more valued crop with a high demand in Samnapur and Dindori than the traditional Baiga crops - kodo and kutki. Chain Singh: "All the junglees (forest rangers) have their eyes on raahar, if you plant that, the officials will want it, they will definitely get greedy for it (moh jaat hai). But, kodo-kutki, they have no interest.

Sukhram: Let's first make the area ('Area' banaate hain), draw a map and number out plots. Then, we clear the area off weeds. Then we'll have to get the patwari to come and measure it and ratify it".

Dadulal: "Ok, then. Mother earth is our witness, these plots are our plots, we have occupied them honestly, and we will grow kodo-kutki on them".


"Yes", said Sukhram, "That's important. Only truthful/legitimate claimants on this land, no liars." After some 'hums' and 'haws' of agreement, the meeting broke up.

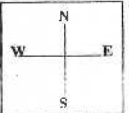
The chapter thus seeks to capture and convey a sense of the tentativeness of the process of claiming land in the forest fringes, and the repeated enactments of possession that are necessary to sustain such claims. In the process, the taken-for-granted quality of the material finiteness of land is pressured into question, as are ideas of idealized rural collectives or 'communities' in relation to provisioning for scarce natural resources. Encroachment as a marginal spatial practice of claiming, a form of occupation that is never stable, always vulnerable to being overrun by state actors, or rival groups, by official categories, or by the movements and creations of the landscape itself, brings into view the importance of land for resource-dependent rural communities, as well as the fissures and fractures that make it vulnerable to alienation by intimate others, as well as by state and corporate interests. The


role of land rights groups remains ambiguous; this chapter aims not to judge or comment on their interventions, but to depict as accurately as possible how their activities and moral and political projects come to be absorbed materially and socially into the landscapes and lives they seek to improve.

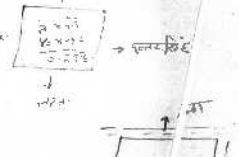
The next chapter speaks directly to the historical antecedents of such improvement projects in the Baigachak region.


स्थल - मानचित्र (नजरी नक्सा)

| | |
|---|---|
| वन अधिकार धारक का नाम :- मिथू (पुत्रा पुत्रा) |  |
| ग्राम का नाम :- गाँव का नाम | |
| पटवारी हल्का नम्बर :- ६९ | |
| ग्राम पंचायत का नाम :- गाँव का नाम | |
| प्लॉट संख्या / सड़क नम्बर | |
| प्लॉट / सड़क का रकबा (वर्ग) $0.40 + 0.35 + 0.62 = 1.37$ | |
| वनक्षेत्र का विवरण ४०० | |



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③ 

राजस्व निरीक्षक के हस्ताक्षर

पटवारी के हस्ताक्षर

वन रक्षक के हस्ताक्षर

वनमण्डलीय अधिकारी / वनसंरक्षक

जिला जनजातीय कल्याण अधिकारी

जिला कलेक्टर

Fig. 11. The graphic representation of title granted under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act (2006). The top of the form says “Visual depiction/ Mental map of area”. The title depicts three plots of land in forest area granted to one Mitthoo Singh, held jointly by him and his three brothers. The title is signed by the revenue survey officer, the patwari, the forest guard, the deputy forest ranger, the District tribal welfare officer, and the Collector.

CHAPTER 3

Shifting Cultivator, Peasant, Forest-Dweller: Legacies and Landscapes of Improvement in the Baigachak

“Utho utho re kisaan, ab toh ho gayi re bihaan”. “Rise and shine, farmer, for it is now morning”. So saying, Phulwati would will herself to wake up each morning and urge her reluctant limbs into action. *“Kisaan aadmi hain toh bhoota hi bhoota. Jhaangar nahi bhi chale, toh chalaan part hai”* “For a farmer, there is always work, there is no respite, even if your limbs don’t obey, you have to push them”. In describing herself as *kisaan*, a moniker usually reserved for members of the Gond community, Phulwati, a Baiga woman, was, I believe, temporarily underscoring her belonging amongst a larger community of industrious peasantry who directed their bodily energies to useful labor, rather than to a class of ‘forest-dwellers’ who belonged in the forest and were powerless to resist their bodily impulses. At other times, however, Phulwati would say something that conveyed quite the opposite sentiment. I once chanced upon her on a hot afternoon, reclining against a wall of her home, clad only up to the waist in her short, tattered *Baigani* saree. Her daughter, Gondiya, on seeing me, embarrassedly handed her mother a blouse to cover herself. *“Ab Baigin toh aise hi rahis,”* shrugged Phulwati. *“Mayawati jangal la bodh karela aais, toh bujh jaat hai”* “The people of the forest, they will be like this only. Mayawati has come to study the forest, she understands/knows our ways by now.” Turning to me: “Arre, the state tries a lot, but what do to, Baigas don’t improve” (*“Sarkaar beja koshish karis, lekin Baiga sudhaare nahi sudhre”*). It strikes me that in both instances, Phulwati expresses a desire for improvement, or at least movement, confronting in the process, the resistance of her limbs to action and to a supposedly improved comportment; she confronts her body as a Baiga body, as a kind of limit. Phulwati’s statements link bodily dispositions and practices to the wider social, material and historical conditions that enable and constrain the emergence of certain kinds of

selfhood, as well as possibilities of being and acting in the world. These might shift according to the moods and moments of everyday life, but acquire some coherence when seen in the context of colonial and postcolonial projects of government (*sarkaar*), improvement (*sudhaar*) and development (*vikaas*) that targeted forest-dwelling communities like the Baiga and the landscapes they inhabited.

Phulwati's husband, Sukhram, was the very picture of an industrious farmer and considered a model for other Baigas in the village. Phulwati often said of her husband that he had to be doing something, he couldn't just sit still. "It's a waste of time", said Sukhram. "I keep telling the boys [his sons], don't waste your time going here and there. Tread a straight path (*Line se chalo*). Mend your ways! Improve! (*Sudhar jao!*), I tell them. But it seems they are determined to be Baiga boys, drinking and whiling away their time". When not busy working in his fields or back garden, or fixing up things around the house, Sukhram would be off on errands inquiring about this scheme or that. He was particularly keen on bringing a check-dam construction program to the hamlet that would slow down the erosion from the forest slopes and direct rainwater to fields that lay in the catchment area and generate employment at the same time. "We are trying to petition the panchayat to bring the work into our village, but let's see... It's difficult to secure cooperation. Our welfare/betterment lies in the welfare/betterment of land, people are not able to understand this (*Zameen ki bhalaai mein hi apni bhalaai hai, log samajh nahi paate*)." Sukhram's anxieties and desires for improvement, to better his own or his neighbors' quality of life, to improve the quality and productivity of the land, linked up with the more intentional projects of state and non-state agents to improve landscapes and lives.

Such quotidian examples bring out how moral attributes such as profligacy, wastefulness or shiftlessness, or husbandry, enterprise and resourcefulness, came to attach to particular caste groups, often centering on bodily markers and dispositions, extending to

habits and practices, and thence to homes, habitations, and terrain. How did such perceptions resolve themselves into binaries of agrarian and non-agrarian as horizons of, as well as limits to, improvement? What role did colonial and postcolonial projects of forest management, agrarian extension and improvement of the region's 'aboriginal' population play in the encrustation and sedimentation of such perceptions, such that they appeared internal to the social life of a landscape?

Colonial efforts to consolidate forests and expand plough agriculture in the Central Provinces led to a programmatic drive against populations and practices deemed to be ruinous to forests. Chief among these were the Baigas and their form of shifting cultivation (called *bewar*), which came to be emblematic of the wildness and unreclaimed character both of the landscape as well as its inhabitants, culminating in formation of a reserve area called the Baigachak in 1890 where all bewar-practising Baiga of the Mandla-Dindori region were forcibly resettled. The first part of the chapter gives an account of the period between 1870 and 1890 as the decisive phase when a generalized discourse of the wildness of the landscape and its inhabitants and the joint need for their care, management and improvement was converted into specific technology of government reordering landscapes and populations. The enclosure of forests and the formation of the Chak set in motion population movements that altered the composition of settlements in the region in the process, naturalizing 'Gond' and 'Baiga' as opposed categories of plough-wielding sedentary farmer and unreclaimed, axe-wielding forest-dweller who occupied the 'plains' and the 'hills' respectively. Such encrustations of community and landscape present themselves as self-evident truths in present-day Dindori and guide how development projects are directed towards certain neighborhoods and communities. What rationalities (and irrationalities) of government and improvement were operational in the establishment of the Chak? How does the landscape of present-day Dindori bear traces of this colonial-era resettlement drive?

In the latter half of this chapter, I explore contemporary governmental and NGO efforts to improve Baiga lives, in the process also trying to mould Baiga villagers into certain kinds of subjects who inhabit their landscapes in specific ways— on the one hand, model citizens invested in the improvement of their farmlands and livestock, and on the other, ethical environmental subjects who protect forests. In doing so, they repeatedly come up against the recalcitrance of a Baiga ‘nature’ as well a Baiga ‘culture’— both as intractable and resistant to improvement because of how bound up they are with each other.

However, I suggest a more diffuse presence of the desire for improvement among the inhabitants of Samnapur that is constantly thwarted by the felt inertia and ennui of a ‘dehaati’ (rural, backward), landscape. In other words, present-day projects of agricultural improvement and forest conservation bear traces of top-down, statist ambitions to reconstitute subjectivities and difference by reordering a realm of ‘nature’, but what was more palpable was the way in which the landscape itself seemed to both aspire to and resist attempts at reordering or improving. State and NGO projects for improvement do not so much ‘fail,’ as get absorbed into people’s lives and even the physical surface of landscapes, in diffuse and unpredictable ways, nonetheless offering some kind of horizon to tether aspiration to. What results is not so much the gap between a ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007) and its failures, but an ever present desire for improvement, shadowed by the constant feeling of this desire being thwarted by the unpredictability of landscapes and dispositions— both their liveliness and their inertia.

Baiga Vikas or Development: From Vulnerability to Welfare

If the introduction to the dissertation described some of the vulnerabilities that haunt Baiga lives as one the poorest and most resource-dependent of Scheduled Tribe communities, Dindori boasted a plethora of welfare programs that were aimed at the Baiga in particular: at

the state level, the Madhya Pradesh Scheduled Tribes Welfare Department recognizes the Baiga, Bhariya and Sahariya as ‘specific backward tribes’ (*vishesh pichhdi janjaati*), on the basis of criteria such as ‘technology level in agriculture’, ‘minimum levels of literacy’, ‘residence in extremely backward and remote areas’, and ‘stable or declining population’⁶². A Baiga individual from Shahdol was appointed secretary of the institution. “It is rare that someone from our community gets to that level,” said Ramesh, a Baiga schoolteacher in Bona village. Dindori itself housed a dusty ‘Baiga Development’ office whose project manager informed me without a trace of irony that the Baiga were “national humans— like we have national animal, national bird”. He continued: “*Baiga sarkaar ki poshak jaati hai*— The Baiga are the state’s ‘chosen’ tribe/group”. The term *poshan* indicates the care, nurturance and upbringing of the very young. Indeed, the mix of force and inducement used to shift Baiga cultivators to sedentary cultivation in the latter part of the nineteenth century was repeatedly referred to as ‘weaning’ (Elwin 2007[1939], 111). As historians and anthropologists of tribal-dominated and forest areas have noted, colonial discourses on groups perceived to be outside the caste hierarchies of the settled agrarian order have repeatedly deployed tropes such as that of wildness, primitiveness, and savagery to underline their difference and alterity, justifying oftentimes violent measures to subdue, reform and resettle them (Baviskar 1995; Damodaran 2005; Guha 1999; Skaria 1997, 1999). Colonial imaginaries of the ‘primitive’ as childlike, requiring both protection and care as well as discipline and control have come to bear on the postcolonial futures of particular communities in distinct ways. In Dindori, there were special incentives in the form of scholarship money, clothes and books to encourage Baiga children to go to school. Malaria

⁶²<http://www.mp.gov.in/en/web/tribal/primitivetribes>. Accessed on 03/26/2017. State nomenclature for communities classified as ‘primitive tribal groups’ has now changed to ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups’ (Tribal Committee Committee Report, 2014).

eradication programs trained Baiga youngsters to spread information about cleanliness in their hamlets. Baigas were automatically entitled to Antyodaya cards, which offered state subsidized grain at even lower rates than those holding Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards. On providing caste affiliation certificates, proof of domicile, and proof of having cleared tenth standard examinations, Baiga villagers were entitled to jobs in the district level administration. There was a scramble among boys in the village, aged between 18 and 22, who had dropped out of the formal education system, to re-enroll via 'Open' schools, and get a certificate for having cleared their tenth board examinations. A flourishing market in fake certificates had emerged in the neighboring district of Anuppur.

International, donor-driven development initiatives increasingly bring funds to the 'Baigachak area,' a group of six present-day hamlets that came within the original area demarcated as the Chak, to implement projects for agricultural improvement, livelihood support, health, literacy and forest conservation. These plans and programs, frequently designed by international experts, such as the SRI scheme I discuss later in the chapter, tried to integrate often incommensurable agendas— like forest regeneration and agricultural improvement. This led to many other hamlets petitioning their Panchayats to be included in the Baigachak. '*Yahaan bhi thoda vikaaas aaye, behenji*', said Sonwatibai, a feisty Baiga grandmother from Ladwani village, defiantly— 'let's bring some development this way as well!' Panchayat heads, schoolteachers, NGO workers, shop-owners, and the wealthier, non-Baiga castes would replay what sounded like tired, rehearsed stereotypes about the Baiga, on the one hand referring to them as lazy, primitive, forest-dwelling, strange of dress and habit, and on the other hand, exclaiming that that they had developed much, 'come down' from the forests, didn't stand out from the general populace so much anymore, and 'even the girls were going to school now'. Both the Baigas' recalcitrance to improvement and their embrace of it was localized in their bodily natures - to drink, sexual excess, and a general sense of

freedom, restriction from the moral strictures of the ‘dehaat’ or village life, as well as their hardiness and resilience to illness and the elements - all somehow attributed to their ‘natural habitat’, the forest. These oft-repeated perceptions attain the status of official truths in British administrative records— sub-sections of Colonel H.C.E. Ward’s 1870 Settlement Report for Mandla district list traits of the ‘Byga’ such as ‘their independence’, their good behavior’, ‘ignorance of the value of money’, ‘no desire for luxuries’ and ‘laziness as cultivators’ (Ward 1870 pp. 32, pp. 34-37). How were the Baiga historically constituted as wild inhabitants of the dense Maikal forests, deficient subjects in need of civilization and improvement, and incorporated largely against their will into a wider regime of civilization and improvement?

Colonial perceptions of Baiga and bewar

The question of Baiga improvement in the nineteenth century revolved very much around *bewar*, or the practice of swidden cultivation on the hill slopes of the Maikal ranges in the upper Narmada valley. In colonial accounts, the ‘Bygas’ are uniformly described as ‘wild’ and ‘unreclaimed’ as the forests they inhabit⁶³. Unlike the Bhils of the western Central Provinces and the Dangs, whose wildness was constructed primarily through their activities of raiding and *thuggee*, Baiga wildness was attributed to forest-dwelling and shifting cultivation. Though the British unseated the Marathas from the formerly Gond principality of Garh Mandla in 1818, it was only in 1861 that the Central Provinces were unified under British administration, and colonial interests in the landscape entrenched, with surveys and settlements of agricultural tracts, and the enactment of a series of Forest Acts that divided up wooded areas into state-owned, distinct privately-owned classes of forest, and wastelands.

⁶³ For colonial era accounts of bewar farming and the Maikal ranges more generally, I rely on three sources: Frederick James Forsyth’s travelogue, *The Highlands of Central India: Notes on their Forests and Wild Tribes, Natural History and Sports*, London 1889; Colonel H.C.E. Ward, *Land Revenue Settlement Report for Mandla, 1870*, and missionary-turned-anthropologist Verrier Elwin’s monograph, *The Baiga* (Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007[1986]).

Shifting cultivation in the hills, especially the form practised by the Baiga, came under fire for being dependent on burning trees and firing up fields. 19th century accounts of the Central Provinces by British travellers, administrator-ethnographers and missionaries are full of contradictions. On the one hand, they describe the highland landscape of central India as a sort of untrammelled frontier zone—the region lying to the east of the Malwa plateau and the north-west of the Bastar principality as ‘wild,’ ‘hilly’ and ‘unexplored,’ populated by exotic hunting species like gaur, tiger, panthers and sambhar, as well as by native inhabitants who roamed wild in the hills, hunting, gathering, and practising their form of intermittent agriculture by lopping vast tracts of jungle. At the same time, it is clear that railways lines have started to be laid, a dense admixture of castes and communities populate the landscape, engaged in commerce and agriculture, a variety of studies and surveys of the region have already been conducted, and administrative and military outposts of the colonial state, set up⁶⁴. Speculators and contractors, anticipating the demand for teak and sal, have already extensively logged the forests of Mahadeo and Amarkantak. Nonetheless, shifting cultivation is signalled out as the chief cause of the ruination of forests, and its containment made the single most urgent priority for the government. The ‘original inhabitants’ themselves are hierarchized on the basis of their ‘acculturation’ to Hindu practices, with the Kurmees, Lodhas and Powars being hailed as the most Hinduized castes of industrious agrarian pioneers, and the Gonds, Korkus and Bygas being the ‘original inhabitants’ who either roam free in the hills or live an impoverished version of their former lives on the margins of Hindu society in the plains. Frederick James Forsyth, a British traveller and hunting enthusiast who subsequently became Conservator of Forests, produced an account of his travels across the central Indian plateau forests. “[T]he highland centre of the province, with its extensive

⁶⁴ Vinita Damodaran (2005) and Sumit Guha (1999) make the same observations.

forests and mineral wealth, its limitless tracts of unreclaimed waste, and scanty, half-wild population is ripe for a good share of central attention”. Despite such vast acres of mountainous terrain, a large part of this unreclaimed area was nonetheless suitable for tillage and ‘improvement’— “During the times of anarchy which preceded our rule, the proper amount of..tax had become very uncertain...”. “Our strong and equable rule greatly encouraged the arts of peace... and this circumstance, soon bestowed on property in land a value which it had never possessed” (Forsyth 1889, 21). Forsyth contends that the lack of any clearly recognized right of property in these unreclaimed wastelands that could give ‘the agricultural classes a real interest in the improvement of their lands; had led to proliferating and uncertain claims by settlers that had been invited into the region by the opening up of railways. These claims ‘cluttered up’ the process of putting these ‘cultural wastes’ to good use, and ‘thus the progress of the country was in danger’. He adds, ‘the forest question also became urgent, timber being required in large quantities by the railways’ (1889, 21). According to Forsyth that the biggest impediment to agrarian extension and timber protection is the system of ‘*dhya*’ cultivation practiced by the indigeneous or ‘aboriginal tribes’ of the region.

“... [T]he hill tribes..had for centuries devastated the forests, by the cutting and burning of their best timber to form ashes to manure their wretched fields of half-wild grain. This was itself almost sufficient to have proved the ruin of the forests...” (31). “For years afterwards, when exploring in the forests, we continued to come on the charred remains of these multitudes of these slaughtered innocents, most of them being quite immature and unfit for felling at any time” (34).

Though Forsyth’s account is styled as a travelogue with colourful descriptions of the landscape, animals, hunting expeditions, and the native inhabitants and their depredations described with a kind of fascinated horror, he also offers the most explicit rationale justifying the colonial state’s urgent interference— improvement, by which is meant bringing the maximum possible land under the plough and allocating different kinds of tree species to

purposes that enhance state revenues. Indigenous forms of agriculture and usages of tree species such as the uses of bark and leaves, and the extraction of resin by making chips in the trunk, are unilaterally condemned as inferior.

The Settlement Officer for Mandla, Colonel H.C.E. Ward, in the first comprehensive report on the district, was more pragmatic and programmatic in his concerns— dhya cultivation was destructive to forests and Ward was concerned with establishing and evaluating the viability of various arrangements to get the Baigas to take up plough cultivation.

“With no other instrument of agriculture but their axe and a small sickle (‘hussia’), it is astonishing to see the extent of clearing one village of Byga makes on the side of the hills on which their village is located. Until lately, it was their habit to select the spots for their dhyas with an utter disregard for the rules of forest conservancy” (38). “It is much to be regretted that these people have caused such devastation in the forests; and it is really difficult to believe that so few people could sweep the face of the earth so clear of timber as they have done in the Baiga country par excellence...” (Ward 1870, 39).

Ward repeatedly describes both dhya cultivation and its practitioners as ‘wasteful’ and ‘lazy,’ (1870, 32-33), seamlessly mingling the attributes of the Gond and Byga, the only aboriginals who, according to him, call for a ‘separate mention’, with his observations regarding their forms of cultivation. The Gond and Byga, claimed Ward, were bound to this form of cultivation primarily by habit, and because they were averse to labor, and by their ‘spasmodic sort of toil’ (Forsyth 1889, 30) eked out a living from the same plot of land for three years, after which they simply picked up and moved elsewhere, leaving in their wake a burnt and flattened clearing which would take a minimum of seven years to regenerate. Shifting cultivators were not only apathetic and averse to toil, but also possessed of ‘wandering propensities’ that had, according to Ward had been encouraged by generous grants of wasteland by the state. They were a people defined as inherently deficient due to their lack of ‘wants’, and before they could be expected to “change their habits of life, it will

be necessary to create a want among them, either for the luxuries, or for what are to other races the necessities of life” (Ward 1870, 37). If the area were opened up trade, Ward proposed, ‘and the value of money..more known... the Bygas would soon learn where their own advantage laid, and would do as their brethren have done in other parts of the country— drop the axe and take to the plough, but unless we have shown them what benefit it is to them, and, ... have created wants for which their present primitive habits will not enable them to provide form we cannot expect them to change their habits” (1870, 39). Likewise, the manner of cultivation was criticised as deficient— carried out on inferior grade soils, by ‘lazy’ methods like broadcasting, and yielding a poorer grade of produce such as kodon, kootkee, and a coarse rice called Bygana. Kodon and kutkee thrived on reddish, sandy soils (*bharra*) frequently found on hill slopes while the clayey loamy soils of the flatter terrains (*moto*) were more suited to rice and wheat⁶⁵. The cultivators, Ward claimed, were well aware of the exhausting quality of their crop, and returns dwindled so drastically over the three year cycle of bewar, that they were forced to leave and make other clearings (unlike moto soils that could be cultivated for several years running with a mix of crops that replenished the soil). The historian Archana Prasad notes that frequent movement was thus necessitated by soil quality, which, in colonial accounts was transfigured into the inherently rootless and wandering character of the cultivators⁶⁶.

Ward distinguishes between the forms of cultivation practised the Gond and the Baiga. While Gond cultivators tended to have more long-standing clearings, to which they dragged wood from nearby forests, before firing up their fields and sowing their dhyas in the

⁶⁵ In my interviews with villagers, *bharra* and *moto* designated soil quality as much as types of soil. The former was considered inferior and good ‘only’ for kodon/kutki, the latter was considered better quality soil, and villagers were always concerned with demarcating their fields such that they captured more *moto* land.

⁶⁶ Archana Prasad, *Forests and Subsistence in Central India*, JNU, 1994. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Also see Archana Prasad, *Against Ecological Romanticism, Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity*. New Delhi 2005.

wood-ash, the Baiga cultivated in the state-reserved forests, burning wood *in situ*. Gond farmers tended to use the plough in the second year of the dhya cycle, while the Baiga did not, using the hoe instead to break up clods of earth. In Verrier Elwin's monograph of the 1930s, 'The Baiga', the distinction between these two forms acquires the status of an anthropological truth. The Baigas' aversion to the plough is grounded in their myths, especially the creation myth of Naanga Baiga, who when, offered the opportunity to plough the land by Bhagawan himself, yielded this privilege to his brother the Gond, settling instead for living off the earth by gathering and hunting and reaping whatever could be planted without desecrating the earth with the plough (Elwin 2007/1986[1939]). While for Elwin, this distinction elevated the Baiga to a far superior status to their plough-acculturated neighbors, which must be protected by leaving them to practise their bewar, for Ward, the Byga represented a tougher challenge to improve and civilize than the Gond, who were not strangers to the plough. The reclamation of both, for Ward, was a task that would take time, and require a combination of force, and care and management (1870, 34).

"It will be a work of time before we can hope to reclaim the Gond from his wandering propensities. I put more faith in his being prosecuted in the criminal courts for trespass...than in any amount of explanation" (34). "This entails no hardship on the people either, for they have been treated liberally enough and, determined to move occasionally, they can always go into the malgoozaree areas, where there is plenty of spare land available and example has shown that, when properly taught, the Gond can become a very fair cultivator" (34).

"The work of civilizing the Byga will be much more difficult...[It] has been found quite impracticable, as well as hard and impolitic, to force them to give up their dhya cultivation and take to the plough; so settlement with them has been simply the attempt to confine their destructive propensities within a ring fence... If carefully looked after, the injury they cause to the forests..may be made more negative than positive, by placing certain restrictions on their wandering habits, and keeping them within the boundaries now fixed for them; which have been selected so as to allow them enough wood for their wants, but in situations where, owing to their previous devastations, or the inaccessibility of the locality, the timber is of little value..." (Ward 1870, 39).

Ward was thus the first to propose that it might be easier, and more ‘politic’ to confine bewar within a limited area rather than to force Baigas to take up plough-farming, and in 1868, roughly seven thousand acres were set apart for Baigas in twelve villages in which they could confine their bewar cutting activities (while previously they cut bewars in an area spanning almost 30,000 acres). Prasad (1994) and Rangarajan (1996) note that the district of Balaghat was created in 1866 to begin the experiment of restricting bewar and turning the Baiga to plough cultivation. While Ward pronounces the Baiga ‘quite satisfied’ with the arrangements made to resettle them, Baiga responses to these attempts were, in fact, quite varied. Ward reports that while Baigas in Mandla ‘tehsel’ were easier to convert to the plough, having already lived in proximity to Gonds and through ‘force of example’ had taken to the plough. With these Baiga, Ward notes, it was not so much “any settled objection to regular cultivation as a want of means and a general dislike of the troubles of civilization” (35). The Bygas of Ramgurh tehsel, on the other hand, deep in the Mykal ranges, he called the ‘real Bygas’— “Wild as the forests they live in, they have none of that cringing fear of authority which is shown by the Bygas and Gonds of ‘Mundlah’”. (36). It is these Baigas, who would prove most resistant to the resettlement drive, and were made the first subjects of the Baigachak experiment of 1890.

Between 1870 and 1890, provincial administrators and forest officials debated back and forth over whether it was more effective to incentivize plough cultivation, or penalize shifting cultivation and some combination of methods appears to have been tried throughout this period. Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces, Richard Temple, was, according to Elwin, not so much concerned with forest protection, and more inclined to a policy of ‘benevolent improvement’ hoping that the wilder tribes could be gradually induced to settle down permanently into closer communication with the more civilized inhabitants (quoted in Elwin 112). He discouraged more punitive efforts, advocating a slower policy of ‘weaning’

(quoted in Elwin 2007, 114). The somewhat scattered and chancey nature of these early attempts becomes clear through reports of incidents like the following:

“In 1871, a ‘lucky chance’ helped Colonel Bloomfield to win over a whole field of Narotia Baiga. Government had offered a reward for of Rs. 200 for the killing of a dangerous elephant; and the Khandarparhi Baiga... helped Bloomfield and Naylor hunt the mad creature down, and were given the reward. As a result of this, Bloomfield persuaded them to come down from the rocks of Kahndarparhi and take to the plough in the good lands of Karwahi” (*The Baiga*, 114).

Among officials, Bloomfield and Temple represented the more sympathetic, less punitive strain favouring Baiga civilization and uplift rather than penalizing bewar. After these early attempts, more coercive measures were put in place as the value of forest produce increased dramatically. Allowing bewar to continue while employing discouraging techniques like taxing agricultural implements only was considered by some administrators to be too lenient, so the tax on the axe was abolished and bewar banned. Major Repton, the Settlement Commissioner for the Central Provinces was sanctioned an expenditure of Rs. 2000 to resettle the Baiga. Repton favoured the destruction of standing bewar crops, whenever they were discovered.

By March of 1879, 33 families had come down into Gond villages and were putting up huts for which they were allowed to collect bamboo and grasses, free of charge (114). By May 1881, 75 Baiga families had settled with land, grains, bullocks and implements at the cost of about Rs. 3000, 40 others settled without assistance, and 485 others, ‘unreclaimed’ (Elwin 2007, 114). By 1885, Elwin says, the ‘march of civilization’ had become irreversible, and bewar was more or less extinguished from Mandla district. By 1890. Ward’s proposal for a reserve where the Baiga could be allowed to practice bewar was taken up again. The Chak was ‘established by a Letter (No. 2860/221 of the 13th May, 1890) from M.K. Laurie’⁶⁷,

⁶⁷ Quoted in Elwin 2007, p.116.

Secretary to the Chief Commissioner. “After much discussion, it is now proposed to confine all the bewar-cutting Baiga to an area carved out of Block 54, amounting to 23, 920 acres.. This is the only tract in Mandla in which bewar cultivation shall in future be permitted. The area will be known as the Baiga Reserve” (quoted in Elwin, *The Baiga*, p. 116).

The Chak was an inaccessible and hilly part of Mandla, where the timber was deemed to be of poor quality (Elwin 2007, 116). Only Baigas were allowed to settle in the reserve, and all those outside had to either move in, or give up bewar. The Chak was supposed to be a territory within which bewar could be practised in a restricted manner and concessional land grants and tax exemptions given to Baiga who showed inclinations towards plough cultivation. The inhabitants of the Chak were ‘put under constant discipline’, supervised by a Forester at all times, and bewar plots were strictly delimited. It was made clear that bewar was not favoured. Elwin argues that the Chak was “not, therefore, a kind of National Park where the Baiga would be allowed to carry on their ancient tribal life, but a Reformatory where the Baiga, under strict supervision and increasing official pressure, would be slowly ‘weaned’ from their primitive habits” (2007, 118). Outside the Chak, too, Baiga were ‘encouraged to seek other means of support’ to which end they were allotted land on long leases, advanced interest –free loans for cattle and agricultural implements, and to seek employment with the Forest Department. Entire settlements within reserved forests, with a dominantly Baiga population, where villagers could no longer practice bewar, were converted into ‘forest villages’ that were essentially labor reserves for the forest department. Historians note that it did not serve the authorities to completely eliminate bewar. The Baiga of the Chak were to be retained as “forest-workers,” and their care and management entrusted to the Forest Department (2007, 117). Presently, all the villages that comprised the original Chak— Dhukrukta, Silpiri, Dhaba, Ajgar, Jhilung, Lamota and Rajni Sarai, fall within Dindori district, and continue to remain in the grip of the Forest Department— with most

development projects having to be routed through the forest authorities. It is also the inhabitants of these villages who have responded with the most alacrity to claim titles under the Forest Rights Act.

The formation of the Chak led to significant population movements, some intentional, and others, not as intentional. Lowland Malguzars were given land grants in exchange for accepting Baiga in their villages, and Gonds asked to settle in Baiga dominated tracts to familiarize the latter with the plough. Elwin repeatedly mentions ‘the mixing of Baiga and Gond’ that was undertaken by the authorities to teach the former new methods of cultivation, in violation of the ‘tribal law...that Baiga should live in separate settlements, and not mixed with other communities’ (2007, 114). The Deputy Commissioner reported that the Baiga ‘clung like a spoilt child to their axe and fire’ (quoted in Elwin, p.119). Historians concur that the Baiga response to the extinguishment of bewar was to first petition and protest the government to let them continue. Around Mandla district, many Baiga started to cut bewars again, in defiance of government rules. When all options had been closed, they took to ‘flight’ (Prasad 1994; Rangarajan 1996). Entire villages were deserted - both Elwin and Prasad mention the village of Rajni Sarai which was completely depopulated. Rajni Sarai is today in Samnapur block and an entirely Gond village, and one of the villages where Ekta Parishad has a longtime following. The hoped-for movement of Baiga into the Chak area did not happen, on the contrary, there was large-scale migration to Chhattisgarh. The population of the Chak dwindled due to disease and famine, and several Gond, Agaria and Ahir were finally permitted to move into the Chak area. Outside the Chak, the promised grants of land and loans were slow to be rolled out, resulting in many Baiga joining the casual labor force of the district.

In a section called ‘the case for bewar’, missionary-turned anthropologist Verrier Elwin tries to make a case for the sustainability of bewar, both for the survival of the forest

ecosystem and the Baiga. While Elwin lamented the picture of Baiga improvement and civilization that was sought to be effected through the restriction of bewar and their forced resettlement into the Chak, he himself made the controversial case for the ‘uplift’ and ‘civilization’ of central Indian tribes by recommending the establishment of ‘a sort of National Park, in which not only the Baiga, but the thousands of simple Gond in their neighborhood might take refuge (Elwin 2007, 517). Elwin, as is well-known, was influential in advising the newly-independent Indian state in formulating tribal policy (Guha 2005), and famously advocated a policy of protectionism that would allow for the autonomy of tribal communities and their customary practices. In ‘A note for the Future’ he makes a passionate and polemical case for the Baiga to be restored to their original status as owners of forests, with minimal government interference in their lives, their tribal institutions restored to full authority and the freedom to practice bewar without restraint. For this suggestion he was subjected to scathing criticism by the nationalist sociologist G.S. Ghurye, who held that Elwin’s arguments for isolating the Baiga were profoundly unscientific and accused him of being an ‘isolationist, no-changer’ (1943, 189). Ghurye argued instead that the ‘so-called aboriginals of India were ‘backward Hindus’ who needed to be reassimilated into the national fold (Ghurye 1943, xvi).

The historian Archana Prasad, in her exhaustive study of the impact of colonial rule on subsistence practices in the Central Provinces in the 19th century, embarks on a revisionist critique of Elwin’s ‘ecological romanticism’, arguing that his plea for the sustainability of bewar was based more on orientalist nostalgia than scientific principle (Prasad 1994; 2003). She also critiques his role in the formation of ‘anti-modern’ tribal identity, asserting that in his eagerness to denounce the moralistic and reformist zeal of Christian missionary activity in the central Indian region, he unknowingly paved the way for right-wing, political Hinduism to become entrenched as a political and cultural force in the area. Prasad argues that bewar

must instead be understood as an autonomous, self-sustaining subsistence cycle based on the fluid interdependence of farming and hunting-gathering, contingent on ecological factors like undulations in the terrain, soil drainage, vegetation, and cultivation cycle. From a re-study of old bewar sites around the present-day village of Rajni Sarai, their comparative gradient and soil composition, Prasad infers the spatial alignment between settlements and bewar fields, in this manner, evoking a geological rationale for Elwin's observation that Baiga settlements had to be close to bewar sites, and were therefore mobile. Despite her critique of Elwin, Prasad also naturalizes the connection between bewar and Baiga, arguing that the form of agriculture was contingent on climatic and topographical factors, and choice of settlement was in turn, dependent on proximity to bewar fields. Prasad then argues that this 'autonomous system' of 'loosely integrated subsistence activities' was grounded in a 'subsistence ethic' and 'communitarian norms,' (Prasad 1994, 56). The claim that bewar was a self-sufficient system of subsistence activities is unsettled by Prasad's own detailed account of the forest as a zone of 'overlapping subsistence activities' including trades like dyeing, iron-smelting, and the extraction, tapping and sale of many different kinds of forest produce (1994, 68). Prasad sees the isolated Maikal region's progressive integration into colonial political economy—through the imposition of settlement and forest reservation laws, the rising domestic demand for timber and global demand for forest produce, and scientific forestry— as rupturing the autonomy of the bewar cycle and resulting in the impoverishment of shifting cultivators, their increasing dependence on moneylenders and traders, and a general lowering of status in interactions with neighboring groups like Gond, Ahir, and Agaria. Prasad's work brings together a vast corpus of archival material that situates bewar and its prohibition in the wider context of colonial political economy, but her conclusions invite a more critical reading. For purposes of this present discussion, I have limited my inquiry to focus on select accounts of shifting cultivation in the upper Narmada valley with a view to teasing out the various skeins

of a logic of ‘improvement’ that was implicit in colonial projects of government of landscapes and populations in the eastern Central Provinces

The caste-tribe question and the agrarian horizons of improvement

An extensive historical and anthropological literature discusses how colonial practices of knowledge and rule consolidated, by the nineteenth century, the distinction between caste and tribe, localizing ‘tribes’ to forested, hilly, ‘wild’ landscapes and castes to the agrarian order of the settled plains (Damodaran 2005, Skaria 1999). In his landmark history of the forest politics of the Central Indian plateau, Sumit Guha contests what he calls the ‘stock dyad’ in Indian academic writing by which tribals are held to be relic populations of pristine forest landscapes, perennial outsiders to plains-dwelling cultivators⁶⁸. He gives an account of how forest and the agrarian frontiers in the vast central Indian plateau were in a dynamic and unstable interplay bound by economy and conquest at least since the 13th century. Forests were highly anthropogenic, strategic and socially stratified domains, knowledge of which was a tradeable economic and security resource within the regional polity. Cultivated tracts and woodlands extended and contracted more or less with equal force, as successive regimes tried to gain military traction over forests, displacing old and establishing new principalities, reordering social hierarchies. Guha also notes how, as regimes fell, agrarian and commercial centers would be reclaimed by scrub and woodlands. British forest and agrarian policy— a hybrid born of imperatives of conquest, fiscal extraction, and conservation— decisively altered ecologies and politics in favour of the retreat of the forest and extension of arable, and the model of ‘village-centred peasant agriculture...was finally realized under colonial auspices’ (200). Guha argues that the trajectories by which communities have arrived at their

⁶⁸ Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200-1991*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999).

contemporary situations and the extent to which they are able to take advantage of postcolonial development efforts was contingent upon how various subaltern groups were positioned to take advantage of the limited economic niches available to them after the wholesale imposition of revenue settlements and takeover of forest lands by the British. This positioning does not resolve in a straightforward fashion into the caste-tribe binary. Damodaran (2005) considers Guha's work problematic on the grounds that in an effort to debunk ideas of the 'ecologically noble savage, pristine forests and isolated tribal people' it does not adequately account for how the movements and productions of local elites and subalterns— caste ideology, rebellions, protests— co-produced these narratives and categories. Moreover, colonial policy in forested and hilly landscapes in the nineteenth century was not merely a body of representational accounts whose only purpose was to root colonial claims over territory (Damodaran 2006). The writings of administrators and foresters took seriously, and documented in detail, the complex tissue of customary rights that predated colonial agrarian and forest policy. Neither was the purpose of this, solely the extinguishment of these practices— Ramachandra Guha, in an early essay, the making of the 1878 Forest Act, has shown how the recognition of these rights were a matter of much debate and contest between the various Crown provinces (Guha 1990). Colonial policy in the hilly and forested tracts of the country was also informed by humanitarian and protectionist agendas to safeguard customary rights to land, and played a role in the forging of an autonomous, 'forest-dwelling' tribal or 'adivasi'⁶⁹ identity in the early 20th century, and in the immediate aftermath of independence⁷⁰. In the foregoing section, we see how, as a result of the sedentarization policies of the late colonial state in the central provinces, contiguous groups of hunters, foragers, and cultivators were differentiated according to their

⁶⁹ As noted earlier, David Hardiman traces the term to the Chhotanagpur region, with the formation of the Adivasi Mahasabha in the 1930s (Hardiman 1987).

⁷⁰ This is discussed more fully in the introduction.

combinatorial modes of livelihood and hierarchized according to their improvability. Ajay Skaria notes that by the 19th century, the distinction between caste and tribe had crystallized in lists, censuses and other kinds of colonial narratives. He argues that the trope of wildness played an important role in the ordering and hierarchizing of difference— both of the colonized from the colonizer and amongst the colonized. While caste constituted the orientalist essence of India (Inden 1990, Dirks 1992), racial ethnology and evolutionary science buttressed the classification of groups perceived to be at the fringes of the agrarian order as ‘wild tribes’. Nonetheless, argues Skaria, the matter was not as simple as mapping wildness on to forest and hill-dwelling groups and civilization on to groups inhabiting the settled plains. Rather, he claims, a logic of ‘anachronistic thought’ applied across criteria like modes of subsistence, the prevalence of literacy, dietary and commensal practices, and marriage and kinship practices, allowing for the classification of groups *in the present* as more or less primitive, primarily in relation to Europe but also to each other, gave force to colonial categories. Specific groups of people come to embody the traits of the landscapes they inhabited— the more ‘improved’ the landscape, the more pliable to improvement its inhabitants. Thus, argues Skaria, different groups came to be classified according to their modes of subsistence and practices of acting upon or transforming nature. Hunting-gathering, shifting cultivation, and pastoralism, came to be easily classified as ‘antecedent to settled agriculture. Even if ...only a section of the community lived by these primitive modes, the entire community was classified as a tribe, and those who practiced settled agriculture were dubbed a more civilized section of it” (Skaria 1997, 730). “Similarly the ways in which societies had transformed their physical environment was treated as emblematic of their relationship with the time of modernity. Many of the groups that came to be called tribes lived in forests or hills, seen as the ‘wild’ portions of the land, away from the civilization associated with plains or riparian areas. Indeed the association of forests with wildness was

so strong that many colonial officials were to recommend that forests be cleared, that these communities be removed from forests as a way of civilizing them, or that they be introduced to “humanizing tendencies of settled agriculture” (Government of Bombay 1898 quoted in Skaria 1997:731)⁷¹.

In the particular local calculus of improvement that I am interested in, the Gond, who, along with the Bhil were the emblematic ‘tribes’ of the central Indian region for much of the period between the 13th and 19th centuries, came to constitute a ‘caste’ of industrious peasant cultivators, with the Baiga as their intimate others, their more ‘primitive’, ‘tribal’, ‘forest-dwelling’ counterparts, bearing the histories of the most recent efforts to sedentarize and civilize.

Governmentality in the Baigachak

The formation of the Baigachak, one of ‘the most notorious colonial experiments in preserving and assimilating central India’s tribal population’ (Rashkow 2014), was by all accounts a ‘failure’ (Prasad 1994, Rangarajan 1996) and would appear to conform to the ‘high modernist’ improvement schemas of James Scott’s description— a state in its imperial ambitions seeking to make an unruly landscape and its populace and their practices visible, legible, and most of all, controllable, through exhaustive programs of naming, mapping, surveying and data collection (Scott 1998). As Scott notes, such improvement programs attempt also to remake the objects of control in their vision, an ambition doomed to failure. But, this still begs the question of what precise modes of governmentality were at stake in

⁷¹ Such region-specific improvement projects targeting specific groups, landscapes and livelihoods, were clearly embedded in more encompassing imperialist trajectories of rule that hitched agriculture to improvement in the ‘tropics’ (Drayton 2005; Grove 1996; Arnold and Guha 1997). One of the earliest expressions of the imposition of an agrarian ideal of improvement in the colonies has been identified with the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793 (Guha 1982).

such an ambitious resettlement program. In ‘The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics’ (Li 2007), Tania Li seeks to understand the rationale of improvement schemes— what they seek to change, and the calculations they apply. She brings together her analysis of improvement as an assemblage of interventionist practices that seek to reorder landscapes, livelihoods and identities along with an ethnography of governmentality in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. Li analyses the imposition by successive governments of their own vision of improvement upon the population and landscape of the central Sulawesi highlands— from the extractive and ultimately disastrous agrarian labor colonies formed by the Dutch East India Company, to the era of ‘ethical rule’, during which missionaries paved the way for the eradication of swidden farming and the ultimate colonization of the rebellious highlands and their incorporation into coastal economy of Indonesia, to the forcible promotion of capitalist farming under Suharto, to, finally, the incentivizing of national parks and conservation enclaves under neoliberalism. Li’s argument draws from James Scott, but departs from his picture of an all-seeing transcendent state to examine the logics of improvement on a more immanent, granular scale. In the tradition of the best critical development ethnographies, Li locates takes as the object of her inquiry, the field of planned development schemes for poverty alleviation, public health, conservation and agricultural extension that were implemented on a vast scale in developing countries through the late eighties and nineties. The ‘will to improve’, in the discursive constellation of such schemes functions in an essentially circular manner— making something ‘better’ becomes its own rationale, guiding initial perceptions of a state of affairs as defective or deficient, and proposing solutions to correct this initial state of affairs, in the process delimiting a problem field amenable to solutions that have been pre-constructed. According to Li, the ‘will to improve’ rests on three pillars— first, that some people occupy a position of ‘trusteeship’ vis-à-vis others, developing, directing, and enhancing the latter’s capacity for action. (Li 2007,

5). These could be ‘colonial officials and missionaries, politicians and bureaucrats, international aid donors, specialists in agriculture, hygiene, credit and conservation, and so-called non-governmental organizations of all kinds’ (2007, 5). In a shift from Scott’s authoritarian, statist model of imposed and directed improvement, this latter, arguably more neoliberal model of improvement deploys not so much coercion as persuasion, education, instruction— setting the course of things such that some modes of action are enabled and others blocked, and particular desired states of affairs come to appear as a result of the natural, everyday interactions of individuals and groups. In the particular World Bank Scheme that Li outlines for instance, accessing Bank funds requires that villagers behave in certain ways that line up with Bank guidelines of transparency and accountability. The will to improve entails ‘problematization’ and ‘rendering technical’— delimiting and structuring a field of action and intervention commensurate with technical solutions that have been devised by experts. Rendering technical in turn, confirms expertise, reinforcing the divide between those positioned as trustees, with the capacity to diagnose deficiency in others, and those who are subject to expert direction. Trustees may not be the originators of the ‘will to improve’ but they are crucial, by means of their specific involvements, in structuring a field of action in which plans become implementable and the behaviors of the target populations and beneficiaries of these programs, directable. In agreement with James Ferguson’s work on Lesotho, Li also argues that the ‘development apparatus’ is an ‘antipolitics machine’, in that it “insistently repose political questions of land, resources, jobs, or wages as technical ‘problems’ responsive to the technical development intervention” (5). Thus, whether imposed in a blatantly top-down and coercive fashion or disguised as ‘welfare’ or ‘development’, and line is frequently blurred, the will to improve is a claim to power. (5-6).

Michel Foucault famously described government as the ‘conduct of conduct’⁷² and Li draws substantially on Foucauldian insights to make her case for improvement as the exercise of a distinct form of governmental rationality. In his essay, ‘Governmentality’, Foucault describes the efflorescence, in Europe, during the period from the sixteenth to seventeenth century to the nineteenth, of a problematic concerning the ‘art of government,’ in which a shift occurred from a territorial picture of sovereignty in which the sovereign stands in a relationship of externality, singularity and transcendence to his principality, and the exercise of power is about maintaining sovereignty, to a more immanent form of government that had to take into account the care and well-being of the population⁷³. This latter picture of government is one of a calculative rationality in which instead of imposing the will of the sovereign, diverse means and ends are balanced in the pursuit of a ‘series of specific finalities’ (Foucault 1991, 95). While sovereignty concerns the exercise of power over a territory and its inhabitants (and each may have its distinctive features - the territory might be hilly or desert or forested, and its inhabitants whatever), the art of government is concerned precisely with the management of these conditions and most of all, the management of men in their relationships to these conditions. Thus, “the things with which...government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relationships, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc; men in their relationship to that other kind of things, customs, habits, ways of acting, thinking, etc; and lastly, men in their relationship to accidents, misfortunes, sickness, famines, epidemics, death, etc” (1991, 93). Three features distinguish this new form of government— first, that government as a concept that extends

⁷² Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power: Afterword”. In Dreyfus and Rabinow (eds.) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 208-264.

⁷³ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality”. In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 87-105.

across domains, rather than limited to an exclusively political domain of the state. Thus, the government of the self is as important as the government of a family unit, which extends into the government of people by a state. Second, the concept of economy becomes central to politics, that is the economy itself becomes an objective of government; and finally, the population as a whole, rather than the disciplining of individuals becomes important. Government, in this picture, is also about the ‘right disposition of things, arranged to as to lead to a convenient end’ (1991, 93).

This analysis of what government consists in is arguably useful in understanding what was at stake in projects like the establishment of the Baigachak. Consider the following conclusions by Ward, in a section of the Settlement Report titled, ‘*arrangements made,*’ where he assesses the results of the first attempt at the settlement of Baigas in 1868,

“If carefully looked after, the injury they cause to the forests there may be made more negative than positive, by placing certain restrictions on their wandering habits, and keeping them within the boundaries now fixed for them which have been selected so as to allow them enough wood for their wants, but in situations where, owing to their previous devastations, or the inaccessibility of the locality, the timber is of little value. These arrangements were sanctioned by you in your Office No. 692, of March 31st, 1868, and I sent out the Superintendent to see that they were properly carried out in Penaburgh and Mokutpore. The result was that 7,794 acres of land have been allotted to these people in twelve villages. The amount of their present cultivation, if roughly measured, is 1.4.....31 acres, so that a little over five times its area of cultivation has been allotted to each. Formerly, the area occupied by these people amounted to over 30,000 acres. They have expressed themselves quite satisfied with the arrangements made for them”

“Having *disposed of* the Byga and dhya cultivation, I will now endeavour to show the system in force throughout the rest of the district” (Ward 1870, 39-40).

In later sections Ward goes on to minutely list crops produced, implements used, and the correlation of climatic and soil conditions in influencing agricultural yield. The formation of this ‘agricultural reformatory’ (Pandian 2009) in late-nineteenth century Central India demonstrates the importance of Foucault’s insight— that the task of government is to consider men in their relationship to things— firstly, in their relations to resources, wealth,

climate and territory, second, in relation to their customs and habits, and third, in relation to death, famines and epidemics. The use by Ward of phrases such as ‘arrangements made’ and ‘disposing off’ suggests that a large part of the task of government was indeed the task of arranging a certain disposition of things, enabling certain processes and constraining others. At the same time that rule was sought to be established through an authoritarian mastery over nature and native populations, through the forced relocation of people into assigned landscapes, care had to be taken that people not be left to starve, (*enough wood be left*), and that there be enough provisioning for welfare to forestall open rebellion⁷⁴. Also, following Foucault, it could be debated whether the imposition of forest laws was to force obedience to the sovereign, or more in the nature of tactics designed to constrain certain practices and behaviors while encouraging others. Furthermore, constant references are made to an original deficient state—the lacking of wants, the absence or desire, the non-existence of specialized knowledge of improved means of cultivation, while other qualities such as independence, honesty, simplicity are exaggerated, and means are proposed, such as the opening up of the region to trade, by which such interior qualities of natives might directed and balanced so as to optimize both their own interests and those of their overlords. Thus, while Foucault’s essay suggests a progressive movement from one form of government to another, in practice the ‘political rationalities’ of rule in colonial and postcolonial settings simultaneously articulate more hybrid elements of discipline, sovereignty, and governmentality (Li 2007, 12).

Bewar today: Postcolonial afterlives and improved agriculture

So far I have attempted to describe how, with the formation of the Baigachak, improvement as a form of governmental rationality inaugurated both difference and

⁷⁴ Prasad reports how, in the Bastar region, deputy Commissioner Grigson tended to a more sympathetic view of shifting cultivation in order that the Maria forest-dwellers not rise up in rebellion (Prasad 1994).

deficiency in the region along a specifically agrarian scale. Groups practising a more recognizably ‘sedentary’ form of cultivation were deemed more agrarian, more improvable, and tasked with the responsibility of instructing and transforming those who were classified repeatedly as ‘wild’ and ‘unreclaimed’, practising an antecedent mode of subsistence. Such tropes, attributing trusteeship and responsibility to some groups and recalcitrance to others, continue to inform the patchwork of improvement programs that suffuse the landscape of Dindori. In his ethnography of development, selfhood and ethical life in rural south India, Anand Pandian describes a different regional history of ‘agrarian citizenship,’ also constituted in significant measure by colonial constructions of the distinction between caste and tribe (Pandian 2009, 67-99). The colonial-era classification and policing of the Kallars of the Madurai river valley in Tamil Nadu as a putative ‘Criminal Tribe’ of irredeemable thieves deeply informs present-day aspirations for development as a moral horizon among the cultivator-castes of the fertile river valley belt of Tamil Nadu. In the daily projects and labours of Tamil villagers, work on the external landscape and on the vagaries of individual interiorities are stitched together to constitute an ethical terrain of self-fashioning that draws its lineaments not just from colonial projects of reform and policing, but also from a distinctly Tamil ethos of cultivation and civility. Pandian’s work stands apart from earlier delineations of development and agrarian improvement in India (Gupta 1998; Mosse 2005) for its focus on government as a reflexive work of engagement with the self. The animating question thus becomes how people come to *want* to live as they ought, and how a specifically agrarian forms of life makes this question meaningful as both a moral and material horizon of aspiration and self-work.

In the context of my own fieldwork, a region repeatedly identified in colonial and contemporary records as ‘wild’ and ‘forested’, and disparaged by self-anointed local improvers as ‘jangli’ and ‘adivasi’, it is interesting to ask how the agrarian ideal comes to

take a more far more tentative hold as a horizon of moral and material advancement, remaining always unfinished, haunted by its shifting, shiftless, former form. Unlike Li and many other ethnographers of planned development, I did not seek to situate myself in the gaps and fissures between the discursive assemblages of improvement schemes and their messy effects, but rather, was from the start, immersed in a ‘landscape of improvement’. In her problematizing of improvement, Li wishes to make improvement strange— I was struck on the contrary by its ubiquity and ordinariness. When I drove into Madagaur village for the first time on a newly acquired motorbike, Govind, a neighbour remarked as I disembarked— *‘kaun sahib aaya hai, aisa socht hoon’* ([Hearing] the motorbike, I thought, which official has come now?) A throwaway comment indicating an almost sensory alertness to the arrival of the many agents of development who breezed in and out of villages on their vehicles. A plethora of schemes for public health, livelihood, agricultural extension and literacy were operational at any given moment in the numerous villages that radiated outwards from the district and sub-district headquarters. At bus shops or tea stalls or riding into a village, one would likely encounter a preoccupied acquaintance rushing to catch a bus or an official, looking to get a document attested, extract a record, or cash a check. Natural and built surfaces—trees, rock faces tea shops and the walls of government offices and homes bore legends and messages reminding residents to attend upcoming Gram Sabha meetings, stressed the importance of maternal and infant nutrition, exhorted villagers to attend marches and rallies, and boldly advertised the loan amounts awarded to particular families for livelihood assistance. ‘Signatures of the state’— material evidence of the state’s presence in people’s lives were in evidence everywhere. Roads, schools and village council buildings were under construction. Derelict and deserted primary health centers dotted the landscape. Forest officials sat smoking and drinking tea in the sunny courtyard of the Samnapur forest range office, while stylish beat guards wearing khakhi uniforms and imitation ray-bans

zipped around on motorbikes. Snaking lines of villagers squatted outside government fair price ration shops on days when supplies arrived. So many state welfare schemes were now routed through NGO collaborations, that for the rural villagers who were their principal beneficiaries, governmental and non-governmental efforts were often indistinguishable, braiding together to constitute a horizon of striving and possibilities for betterment. The field-level staff of NGOs, like MPRLP (Madhya Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project), NIWCYD (National Institute for Women, Child and Youth Development), PRADAN (Participatory Research and Development Action) and Ekta Parishad had set up offices in Samnapur, coordinating the local activities of the organizations they represented. Along with labor contractors, traders, shop owners, doctors, moneylenders, and influential village and district council representatives, they were the most recognizable and familiar faces of development or assistance for the remoter, more cut-off hamlets; they could be approached in times of need or trouble, frequently to mediate conflicts with the state or in the event of family, health or financial crises.

Distinctions between trustees and the objects of their care, management and improvement were not given, they had to be enacted, reproduced and solidified in actual encounters, always threatening to be undone. Expertise was not localized in cumbersome state projects and pompous officials, but was a mobile, elusive commodity, a 'tradeable resource' in the striving for individual and communal advancement.

In the early days of fieldwork, as I struggled to find my foothold (literally) in unfamiliar terrain, I was heavily reliant on Ekta Parishad activist networks for support and mobility, most of whom were kind to me but also wary, and busy with their own duties and agendas. I groped about with the few words that I knew, and bewar was one of them. When news got out of a city person wandering about looking for bewar tracts that were still being farmed, I was summoned by the officials of the Samnapur forest range office and questioned

for several hours (politely, if passive-aggressively). When it was established that I was not a threatening presence, the officials relaxed and told me: “It’s like this madam, we have to be on the lookout for naxals and suchlike, and we would advise you not to go about saying you’re doing research on bewar farming. Some people here incite villagers, get them to farm illegally, set fire to forests, best not to get mixed up with those types”. After being let off with this threat thinly veiled as concerned admonition, I made more discreet inquiries and secured the tentative confidence of Ramesh, a field staff member of EP. He promised to take me to a bewar site if I would hire a car and also not tell Meera (his boss) that he was the one taking me. I thought it was unlikely Meera was likely to be upset— she encouraged my research and curiosities, but agreed anyway. When Meera was away for several days on one of her training meetings, we rented a jeep and set off.

Ramesh and I went to the village of Chhanta, which had, by Ramesh’s admission, remained neglected by the concerned EP activist for a while. When the jeep dropped us at Chhanta, we were greeted by a hostile crew of villagers who had apparently learned, somehow, of our arrival. “You are not welcome here,” we were told. “We trusted you as our improvers (*bhala karne waale*), but you have only caused infinite trouble/curses (*yeh balaa hain*) Tell that ***** never to show his face around here again!” Shaken by this hostility in what had thus far been an unvaryingly welcoming terrain, we left.

It transpired that the particular EP activist in charge had allegedly conspired with Gond farmers, who controlled the village Forest Protection Committee, to report and set fire to the bewars cultivated by Baigas. Cases of encroachment, forest fire, and theft had been filed against many in the Baiga neighborhood, leading to fights with the police and imprisonment. These matters were still ongoing in the High Court in Jabalpur. On our way back to Samnaour Ramesh was full of i-told-you-so’s, regarding the unadvisability of pursuing bewar stories, and the atmosphere of suspicion and fear (*dehshat ka mahaul*) around

bewar kheti or bewar farming. Though it had been a distressing visit, I was struck by the phrase used by the villager to describe the erring NGO worker— *bhala karne waale hi balaa hain*— the improvers have turned rogue, pointing to the much more dispersed terrain of improvement than what was aspired to in the colonial period.

A few individual activists based in MP and Chhattisgarh were of the view that bewar farming was the method of cultivation most suited to the Satpura plateau hills, and that people should be allowed to practice it freely in order to lessen their dependence on state food handouts like subsidized grain. One of these activists, NV, a former Ekta Parishad staff member, lived in Mandla and had authored a slim book called Bewar Swaraj (Bewar Self-Reliance or Bewar Self-Rule). In the booklet, it is impossible to separate descriptions of bewar as a farming technique from its idealization as the essentialized life way that was specific to the forest-dwelling Baiga. NV was treated with suspicion by NGOs who had long-term ties and a more stable presence in the area, but also by the forest-department, who accused him of inciting villagers to rebellion. On one evening, not long after the excursion with Ramesh, I was resting in my room in Samnapur when a young boy knocked on my door and handed me a note written in English. The note, written in pencil, asked me to come to a tea stall by the temple in the main square of Samnapur, and intrigued, I went. The intrigue was dispelled soon enough. I recognized Jacob, an agricultural research scientist whom I had met during pilot fieldwork in the city of Bilaspur in the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh. He was accompanied by NV, whose wariness and reluctance to talk were evident. Jacob informed me that he and NV were in Samnapur to do a tour of bewar sites but had been thwarted by the forest department. “Do your research on bewar,” was Jacob’s parting shot. “I am researching it as the only viable form of cultivation that won’t plunge tribals into poverty and hunger. Do your research and we can make a case for bringing it back”. NV said little, looked on quietly. When I told Ramesh about this encounter later he seemed agitated and

excited. “You met him? What did you think? What did he say? That NV, what he doesn’t know about the Baigas and bewar is not worth knowing. He took me around everywhere when I was a novice activist. What he says, the Baiga do. If he says take up arms against the forest-wallahs, the villagers will agree. These new lady-bosses of EP, they don’t know that much, they can’t tour in the forests and in the night, like NV did”. When I asked Meera about NV she dismissed him summarily saying he had been asked to leave EP on account of various irregularities. The vaguely disreputable air that clung to any mention of NV left me confused as to his status— whether he was activist, expert or thug, which seemed akin to the secretive, somewhat shameful air that accompanied any suggestion of the continued practice of bewar. When I asked villagers in Madagaur about bewar, I was met with evasive responses. ‘We don’t do that anymore,’ appeared to be the consensus. At stake was not just the illegality of bewar but a sense that it was associated with an inferior way of life. How did this sense of bewar contrast with the desire among villagers, NGO staff and officials for improved forms of agriculture which indicated a different *maanasikta* (state of mind/being)?

Balwant, whom I met very late in my fieldwork, was the polar opposite of NV, which was ironic because he was similarly hailed as an ‘expert’ on the Baiga, on their lifeways, and on the ecology of the forest. Unlike NV, Balwant had built up the reputation of his parent organization, National Institute of Women, Child and Youth Development (NIWCYD) into a stable and respectable presence in the area. NIWCYD was called locally as Nagpur Sanstha, and had acquired a reputation in the Dindori-Samnapur area as a harbinger of ‘development’ or ‘vikaas’ to the Baigachak, owing largely to the untiring efforts of its charismatic local coordinator, Balwant Rahangdale. Among journalists, NGOs, and schoolteachers, Balwant was almost revered for his encyclopaedic knowledge of forest ecology, which he had acquired over a decade of having lived in one of the ‘interior’ Baigachak villages, Dhaba. He was considered an ‘expert’ on the Baiga, their agricultural and forestry practices, and

possibly my instant aversion to this framing of anyone as an expert or spokesperson for a people or community, fed my longtime reluctance to meet him. Balwant was a busy man with networks that extended far beyond Samnapur, so the few times I made an attempt to meet him, I was unsuccessful. However, when we did eventually meet, we struck an instant friendship, and I found him to be a dynamic and stimulating conversationalist. generous with his time and meagre resources, and happy to let me spend hours in his spartan home that also doubled as his office perusing his painstakingly collected information on Baigachak flora and fauna. He had a well-thumbed Hindi translation of Verrier Elwin's 'The Baiga' on his bookshelf— "he was an extraordinary man, but constrained by the *videshi* view of forest inhabitants and practices", was his summation of Elwin.

From perusing the NYCWD Annual Reports, I learned that the organization was founded by a group of 'development activists' in 1985, with the aim of working for the ecological and economic self-sufficiency of densely forested, tribal-dominated areas. Funded by a German donor organization, the main activities of the Nagpur-based organization were concentrated in the Mahakaushal region of eastern MP.

"When our founder Malaviyaji, came to the Baigachak area in the 1980s, people were dying of famines and disease. Not a single road, no state program could be found in the area. Just dense, unending forest, and Samnapur itself was a small village. Dindori hadn't yet become its own district, so for everything people had to trek to Mandla. The NIWCYD team made the first inroads into the Baigachak. We learned that people were so deeply removed from modernity (*adhunik yug*), and so suspicious of outsiders, that we had to go slow, learn their ways, earn their trust. Nothing worked, except the language of *maandar* and *timki*. Music, and theatre (*natak*) were how we found that they were most receptive to foreign ideas about health and literacy. Our founder, Malaviyaji, lived and worked here for many years, going on foot from village to village, patiently teaching people and learning from them, before other activists joined him. I myself joined in 2000, (I was with Ekta Parishad before, briefly), and have been here since. I lived in Dhaba village for ten years, and worked with people to document their biodiversity. Its amazing how - once you see it on paper, you realize its value. Once people were made to sit down and document what plants they used in their daily life, what their uses and benefits were, they began to see the tremendous 'resource' that was the jungles of their neighbourhood and the value of conserving it. I held meetings, focus group discussions, used PRI techniques. Over such a long time, Dhaba villagers have come to see the forest as 'theirs'. They take

charge, decide what trees will be thinned or chopped, what seasonal collections will happen, and what will be the boundaries within which they forage for their daily needs. From a thinning forest, the Dhabha forests have almost regenerated to the dense, multi-specie ecosystem that it once was. Streams and ponds that had disappeared, have now come back. That, according to people, is the biggest measure of success. When dried up water-bodies regenerate. formed a core group of ‘youth’ committed to preserving the forest. The Dhaba collective is strong (mazboot sangathan), and over time, word spread of our success in Dhaba and other villages in the area asked us to come and ‘do development’ in their villages as well.”

NIWCYD did indeed appear to have a bewildering range of ongoing projects in several of the Baigachak villages— from agricultural assistance to livelihood, health and literacy initiatives. In order to receive continued support from the organization’s German funders, Balwant was constrained to ‘implement’ projects rapidly, and deliver concrete results— resource meetings held, agricultural productivity increase, number of health camps held, increase in the number of children attending schools, number of projects sanctioned by Gram Sabhas etc. However, he expressed several times the desire to be free to continue his researches into the Baigachak areas for the sake of study alone, and lamented his continued dependence on a salary to make ends meet and support his family (his wife and two sons lived in Seoni district), for which he had to continue in NYWCYD’s employ. “*Samaaj sevak aur vidhyarthi ko sansaar-parivaar mein nahi parhna chahiye, Mayaji*” he would tell me. (The social worker and the student cannot afford to get distracted by social-familial obligations). At the time of our meeting, Balwant was busy holding meetings and trainings at his resource center in Samnapur, and arranging trainings in villages to spread awareness and information about the FRA— he saw the FRA as an unprecedented opportunity to formalize the sense of proprietorship, ownership and stewardship over forests that he had been working for so many years to instil among Baiga villagers. I will say more about these efforts in the conclusion to the dissertation.

On the afternoon we went to Dindori, Balwant had been invited for a consultation at the KVK to advise on a new agricultural program that the Department of Agriculture wished to implement in Samnapur in conjunction with the Madhya Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project (MPRLP, later assimilated into National Rural Livelihoods Mission). The official we met was a brisk, balding man called Harish Dikshit who, upon seeing me and inquiring about my research project, quickly reeled off a list of statistics pertaining to area under cultivation, percentage under different crops, soil types, rainfall aggregates and irrigation. After I scribbled down the information, Balwant and Tiwariji got down to a serious discussion on matters agricultural. The KVK had been charged with implementing and overseeing an agricultural extension program known as SRI (System of Rice Intensification), for increasing paddy yields in rainfed, rice cultivating, lowland rural areas. The SRI, Dikshitji explained, was a program that was based on changing sowing methods from random broadcasting in fields to planting seeds in rows, at a specific distance from each other, and shortening the time that seedlings were left in the nursery. The technology, he said, would allow farmers to increase their yields while using far fewer seeds. The spacing of seeds would allow ‘intercropping’, allowing farmers to plant leguminous crops that allowed the soil to replenish its nutrients, and since the turnover time was shorter, would allow farmers to possibly plant another crop since the soil might still retain some moisture. He continued:

We are tying up with Aajeevika Paiyोजना (MPRLP) in many of the villages, we want to test out the program in the Baigachak villages and for that we have called in Balwantji. You see, the people here are resistant to change their ways and habits, they are set in their ways. You tell them: use less seed, immediately they will think, oh no, if I use less seed how will I feed my family (*poorti kahaan se hoga?*) The real challenge is how to change their mindsets (*maanasikta*). For this, we are approaching Gram Sabhas, getting them to identify jaagruk farmers (progressive, literally ‘awakened’ farmers) and first doing a trial run with them. Seeing their dramatic yields, other farmers automatically follow suit. *Lekin maanasikta nahi ban paayi toh success nahi hoga.* (If mindsets aren’t changed, the program won’t be a success). That’s where people like Balwantji (pointing to Balwant respectfully) come in. Balwant replied: Yes, I think there is potential here (*kaam ho sakta hai*). But, sir, it is not only the people or their mindset that is the problem, we also have to keep local

conditions in mind— whether the technology is feasible in areas where the land is more sloping, or the soil is red and rocky, rather than black and clayey. NIWCYD is already working on improving agricultural technologies, supplying hardier varieties of seeds etc. We are also working to step up production of local millets, *kodo* and *kutki*. These are not crops that the state has been supportive of”.

Dikshitji retorted: It is not as if we don’t support kodo and kutki. We are starting programs to increase their production as well. *Ab baahar se bohot demand aa rahi hai*. There is much demand from ‘outside’, as people have recognised their value. “*Gareebon ki khudai, ameeron ki dawaai*”— the toil of the poor man is the rich man’s medicine. In the context of our discussion, Dikshitji was referring to the growing market for coarse millets amongst the health-conscious urban elite. “But we are getting off topic here (*aap vishay ko kendrit rakhen*)”. Turning to me: “You see, previously programs used to be centrally designed, top-down. But now that gram sabhas have been empowered in Scheduled Areas, all programs (yojanas) have to be proposed (prastaavit) and then approved (paarit) by the villagers themselves. We attended several gram sabha meetings and did ‘pilot surveys’ among people, asking what areas they wanted the most intervention and help in. Many of the villages have severe water problems, so that emerged as ‘problem number one’. Why? It is not as if the government is not installing handpumps. They also said that the government-installed sanitation facilities (*shauchalayas*) were failing. Why? The failure, you see, madam, is lack of technical-know how (*takniki abhaav ke kaaran*). When we asked the people, the lack of technical support to properly implement schemes and yojanas seemed the paramount problem.

From my experience of attending panchayat meetings and how people typically tended to narrate their problems, I thought it unlikely that ‘takniki sahyog’ would have been villagers’ main priority, unless the questions had been framed to elicit that particular answer, but before I could quiz Dikshitji further on this point, one of his staff led into the office an elderly farmer in a dirty white dhoti, the standard black waistcoat, and white turban was ushered in. After some salutations, the man sat down on the floor in a corner, leaning against his staff, respectfully waiting for Dikshit to address his concerns; he had come in to inquire about taking out a loan against his farmer’s credit card.

Dikshitji continued: Now you consider him - he is actually a reasonably prosperous farmer and he should come in confidently and proudly, *poore taam jhaam se*. But instead, he comes in, crouching, sitting in a corner. His bodily dispositions are a clue to his interior disposition (*Shaareerik pravritti se maansik pravritti ka pata chalta hai*). He is so *dabaa hua* (depressed). That is because the *seth-sahukar* (moneylenders) and outsiders to this area have trapped farmers in debt, made credit on fair terms unavailable, and destroyed their self-confidence. It is this *maanasikta*, this condition (*paristhithi*), that we are endeavouring to change.

Balwant: I don't believe there's a long-term solution to food security other than in the context of a more holistic self-reliance and restoring the forest biodiversity with all its varieties of roots, tubers, and medicinal and edible plants. Our programs try to keep this in mind while suggesting new or improved agricultural techniques.

I interjected, somewhat naively: What about *bewar* farming? Is there not an argument that the older method of slash-and-burn cultivation was best suited to upland, plateau lands with rocky soils?

Dikshitji: Madam, bewar...its not possible. Its illegal for one thing (*jangal vibhaag ke niyamon ke viruddh hai*). It involves cutting the forest which the forest department will not allow. Second, it is not possible to improve yields. You see the same bewar cannot be cut again and again, the land becomes useless, and eventually people have to shift to find new bewars. But we are trying to make people self-sufficient (*sampann*) where they are."

The meeting ended soon after and Balwant and I started to drive back to Samnapur.

"You know Sal trees, right?" Balwant called to me, looking over his shoulder. "The Sal brooks no opposition to itself, it doesn't allow anything else to grow in its vicinity/challenge its dominance (*koi aur paudha uska virodh nahi kar sakta*). It's the reason it's the 'sarkari vriksh' (the state's tree). Officials are the same, they brook no opposition".

"So will you tie up with the KVK to implement SRI," I asked?

"I don't know, lets see. I'll introduce the idea to the villagers, but its up to them, I mean, nobody is more knowledgeable about their requirements than they themselves".

* * *

The Baiga hamlet residents in Madagaur had on several occasions asked me to set up a meeting with Balwant. "*Yahaan bhi koi project laao, behenji, humara bhi koi vikaas ho*", they had said on more than one occasion. ("Let us also be the beneficiaries of a project, let there be some development here also"). So one day, I convinced Balwant to ride with me to Madagaur. It was early June, searingly hot, and right before the sowing season. We made our way to my usual haunt, Sukhram's house, and Balwant was welcomed by Phulwati and were offered water to drink and wash our hands. Aaji came out of her room to inspect the visitor. Presently, Bhadiya, Manwati and Chammi bai, and soon more women from the neighbourhood came in and sat down with us. Some of them perched on jute mats, alert and prepared to listen to the newcomer, others sat with their legs stretched, facing away from us.

Balwant had natural charm. He teased the assembled women about being asleep and waking up when they heard the noise of the motorbike. He inquired familiarly into the prices of various forest commodities, and sent a little boy to pluck some jamuns and guavas from the trees outside for him to take. “Tell me, he said conversationally: are you all from the same jaat (in this case he meant, sub-caste) or different jaat?” There was a slightly confused silence, when Phulwati asked— “Do you mean our ‘goth’?”

Some silence and smiles and fidgeting.

Balwant: “*Arrey*, don’t be embarrassed, tell me: are you Rathuriya, Pandariya or Bandariya?” Then, since nobody would answer, he continued: “Why do you change your names to names like Dhurve, Markaam, Tekaam? You are the oldest *jaat* of the forest, you should take pride in that”.

“*Bisraa gayin hain sahib*”, “We’ve forgotten sahib” came the chorus.

The conversation drifted to agriculture, and again Balwant asked a series of quick questions:

What crops do you sow? Do you have enough land ‘caught’ in ‘moto’ (black clayey soil)? “No we have bharra-bharra” (Red and rocky soil). What do you use for manure? “Gobar” (Dung). Do you use your own seeds, leftovers from previous seasons? Or state-provided inputs?

“We use our own. *Sarkaari beej nahi chale baigan ke khet ma!*” (“State-provided seed won’t flourish on Baiga fields”).

What about bewar? Bewar chalt hai? Does any bewar happen here?

Much mirth before anyone answered. Then aaji answered: “*Kahaaaaan bewar! Sab bisar darein, humaar aaji-dadi kart rahin, ab jangal hi nahi toh kahaan bewar?*”

“Where will we do bewar? We’ve forgotten all that...our grandparents used to do it, but now there’s no forest, so where will we do bewar?”

Phulwati: “We don’t do (all) that, sahib”.

Soon, several men from the neighbourhood joined us, and the meeting took on a more formal tone. Balwant quizzed individual residents about their sowing and transplanting techniques—“How would you feel if you could have many times the yield, at a fraction of the cost and seed expenditure?” he asked. “Would you be open to trying one season, one field, with a different method?”

There was a murmur among the assembled villagers. “They had come, the SRI scheme people,” said Sukhram. “But it won’t work here— see, we sow keeping in mind the irregularity of the rain. These seeds are much fewer in number, and if the rains fail, there is no buffer. Sarkaari seeds don’t listen to the sounds of the wind and rain, they do their own thing (“*manmaani chalt hai, hawa paani ki nahi sunt hai*”).

Several Gond farmers had taken advantage of schemes for planting *jatropha* (biodiesel) plants around the bunds of their fields, and claimed to have been paid well for the yield. When I spoke to Jailal Patta, the Madagaur middleschool teacher, he told me “Many schemes come, some pass, some fail. Baigas on the whole are slow to take to inventions. Well, from their point of view, it makes sense, they have very little land, only a handful of them are educated, many are heavily in debt to moneylenders— it would be risky for them to turn over farmland to new techniques”.

In a small way, villagers thus countered statist logics that associated certain communities with certain landscapes, with their own shrewd observations of how nature would behave and respond to specific interventions. Thus, Baigas (or any other villagers) were not reluctant to take up land improvement programs because they were bound to certain habits by their nature, but because experience had intimated what would work and what would not. While colonial distinctions between bewar as a ‘lower’ form of cultivation, and intensive agriculture as a more ‘improved’ form were clearly detectable, in an odd way these logics were also inverted— with many self-appointed ‘improvers’ trying to ‘bring back’ bewar, and villagers themselves questioning and resisting the unilateral imposition of SRI farming upon their existing techniques. Thus, even as the Baigas are produced as subjects of nature by technologies of government and rule, the physicality of terrain itself—whether it is best suited for bewar or intensive rice farming, suggests alternative and subversive routes to improvement. Colonial improvement schemes, that had resettled and enclaved the Baiga,

distinguishing them from their Gond and other neighbors, extinguished certain practices deemed as inferior and harmful, but their echoes are still felt in present-day tribal or adivasi landscapes, where they are taken up in unpredictable ways, with ‘unintended consequences’ for their intended beneficiaries. People themselves went about their lives enacting projects that they felt would improve their lives and landscapes— the alignements of these projects with NGO and state visions for their ‘welfare’ was less certain.

CHAPTER 4

Life, Law and ‘Rumours of Rights’ in the Struggle for Forest Access

In late March 2012, rebellion broke out against the forest department’s excesses in the village of Ranjra, in the southern tip of Dindori district, bordering the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh. Villagers stealthily surrounded forest officials who had come to mark trees for felling, ambushing them and pointing arrows, spears and sickles at the cornered officials. Forming an armed human barrier between trees and officials, they demanded that the forest department stop using the official working plan as a pretext for indiscriminate felling and that villagers be allowed to inspect the plan themselves. Angry residents seized measuring instruments, paint, and clipboards and elicited a written statement from the shaken officials saying that no felling activity would be carried out without the permission of the Gram Sabha (village assembly). The incident featuring remote tribals in a distant forest captured the imagination of regional Hindi language newspapers, who covered the event with some lurid headlines, and even found a mention in a Times of India article on April 12, 2012, with the headline, “Madhya Pradesh tribals defend their gods with bows and arrows against the state-sponsored ‘slaughter’ of trees whom they worship as gods”.

While boundary skirmishes between forest-dwellers and officials were routine in Samnapur, this was the first time during my fieldwork that villagers had overtly contested state ownership, asserting their prior claim on the forest. In Gram Sabha meetings across the district, the ‘*Ranjra waali ghatna*’ (the Ranjra event) came up as an instance of successful collective action. In one of the meetings I attended, the Panchayat secretary conducting the meeting taunted assembled villagers— “See how your Baiga brethren from Ranjra village have banded together to challenge the forest department and demand their rights. You should also do the same, become aware and awakened, then you will know and claim your rights and not have to be dependent on us”.

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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Madhya Pradesh tribals defend their gods with bows & arrows

TNN | Apr 12, 2012, 05:03 AM IST



The Baigas — a dwindling tribe in the remote jungles of Ranjara in Madhya Pradesh's Dindori distri... Read More

BHOPAL: Bamboo bows drawn taut and lethal arrow heads catching the sun's glint, the Baigas - a dwindling tribe in the remote jungles of Ranjara in Madhya Pradesh's Dindori district - are standing guard for their gods against whom they consider state-sponsored marauders.

These lush jungles have been their homes for generations and Baigas worship trees as gods. Tribal men, women and children now stand guard, armed against axes and saws - ironically, taking on forest officials who they think are facilitating the 'slaughter'.

The local village panchayat held frequent meetings to protest the forest department's policy of felling trees. Running out of patience, the panchayat in its recent meeting asked every able man, woman and child to take up their traditional arms to ensure not a single tree is cut.

Dindori Conservator of Forest L P Tiwari said, "We have only been cutting dead wood to provide firewood to locals, under a sustained yield-based working plan. The department strictly follows regulations." A total ban on tree felling could lead to illegal logging on a massive scale, he said, adding, "This was the experience in Uttarakhand."

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Madhya-Pradesh-tribals-defend-their-gods-with-bows-arrows/articleshowprint/12631209.cms>

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Fig. 12. Face-off in Ranjra.

Activists of groups such as Ekta Parishad and NIWCYD who were engaged in disseminating information locally about Forest Rights Act, brought up the heroism of Ranjra's villagers in their meetings, urging villagers to similarly stand up to the FD and demand their share of the forest. In the reportage that followed the event, the Baigas of Ranjra were explicitly cast as autochthonous forest inhabitants who practised nature-worship

and were vanguards of a sacred ecology and indigenous knowledge regime:⁷⁵ Images of tribal men and women, bows drawn, standing their ground against an oppressor state was a powerful image and, at least for a time, Ranjra became a key site for groups tracking forest struggles nationwide and the status of the ongoing implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Subsequent accounts reported that Ranjra was one of the few villages to secure community rights over a significant area of forest land for its claimants, in addition to a large number of individual titles⁷⁶. Even as laws such as the Forest Rights Act sought to secure the tribal citizen by delimiting ‘forest-dwelling’ as the legal subject of rights and recognition, tropes of the ‘insurgent being’ of the adivasi connected in a primordial way to unruly nature remained persistent. In this chapter, I explore this seeming contrast between the adivasi as perennially insurgent subject, bound to primitive passions and constrained by her nature, and the model ‘enviro-legal’ subject, engaging with the law to secure claims to forest.

In the village assembly meetings that I attended after the event in Ranjra and Pondi, I was struck by the apparent contradiction between defiance of state institutions and the law and the simultaneously detailed engagement with procedures and rules and law (*niyam-kaanoon*), and the invocation of sophisticated and abstract notions of rights (*haq*) and justice (*nyaay*). In this chapter, I draw out how such seemingly contrary engagements with the state and law were embedded in long-term histories of accommodation and conflict that both

⁷⁵ The question of how this localized protest came to be imbricated in translocal discourses of indigeneity via activist and NGO solidarities merits separate treatment and is not addressed in this chapter. For detailed studies of how the discourse on indigeneity has come to be a global signifier for diverse self-assertion movements based on affinity to land and soil see Bengt G. Karlsson, “Anthropology and the ‘Indigenous Slot,’” *Critique of Anthropology* 23(4) 2003: 403-423; Kaushik Ghosh, “Between Global Flows and Local Damns: Indigenouness, Locality, and the Transnational Sphere in Jharkhand, India,” *Cultural Anthropology* 21(4) 2006: 501-534; Alpa Shah, “The Dark Side of Indigeneity,” *History Compass* 5(6) 2007: 1806-1832.

⁷⁶ Aparna Pallavi, “Baigas Cheated of Community Forest Rights,” *Down to Earth*, Tuesday, 6 March, 2012, pp.1-8; Anupam Chakravarty, “Baiga tribals become India’s first community to get habitat rights,” *Down to Earth*, Thursday 14 January, 2016, pp.1-9; Anupam Chakravarty, “Baigas Get Home,” *Down to Earth*, Monday, 15 February, 2016, pp.1-14.

exceeded and circulated just below the threshold of legal norms and rules. I try to show that legal norms and rules themselves are not episodic impingements from the ‘outside’ but come to be absorbed in local forms of life. I use ‘forms of life’ in a specific sense here, in the sense of a mutual absorption of the social and the natural. In the first chapter of this dissertation I tracked how Baiga selfhood comes to be expressed in moments of congruence and coevolution with immediate environments of subsistence. In this present chapter, I inquire into forms of subjectivation that simultaneously produce the Baiga as legal persons and as embodied beings inseparable from their physiological existence and exertions. This chapter extends the discussion begun in the previous two chapters on how Baiga individuals constitute themselves as social persons and as subjects of nature in relation to governmental power.

The academic and policy literature on tribal-forest department conflict has tended to focus on the operation of power as episodic, but here I try to capture how power is experienced in relation to rhythms of daily life. Challenges to power are thus also, not only captured by resistance, but in the myriad ways in which rural villagers expand their spaces and capacities for action amidst constraint. When the state was perceived to be unjust or violating its own laws, the preferred mode of challenging its might was through collective action— marches, rallies, protests and sit-ins. More often, however, engaging with the state entailed routine activities such as waiting at an official’s office to get a form signed or stamped, repeat visits to the Collectorate, lining up to collect wages from an employment program, going to the nearest cooperative to sell harvested forest produce, or participating in a vaccination or literacy camp, daily reminders of the labors of care that the everyday state had to perform. Both instances involved bodily exertions of some kind, with people taking steps (literally) as moves toward a ‘more liveable life,’ (Eckert 2015), in both cases appeals were made to the state to recognize and acknowledge the needs, rights, entitlements and

suffering of claimants. In cases of conflicts over forest encroachments and forest boundary violations, the Forest Rights Act increasingly ‘came up’ as an instance of the tide having turned in favour of forest dwellers, and as a check on the FD’s atrocities and violence. This chapter tracks how the law is invoked and engaged with in making everyday appeals to the state, by looking at the specific ways in which Baiga villagers come to see themselves and be seen by state and NGO actors as subjects of rights and recognition in the context of the ongoing implementation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006. How does the ‘natural’ in the form of the bodily engagements of the poor in citizenship struggles, assert its presence in the realm of the social? How do the ‘unruly bodies’ of the poor become a matter of discomfort and threat to the state? What role did ‘non-state’ actors such as NGOs, play in the brokering of such conversations, and how did figures of the state respond? The ongoing democratization of forest governance and adivasi struggles to access forests in various regions of India, provide a particularly fertile site to explore these questions.

The question of villagers’ struggle to access to forests, which was usually a matter of simmering tensions with the forest department, often broke to the surface and had to be explicitly debated and confronted. Many villages in the area were in the process of filing their claims under the FRA, which exacerbated already tense relationships with neighboring groups who controlled forest institutions, and the forest department. Forest officials that I interviewed and conversed with were truculent in their response to this legislation (this is explored in greater detail in the ethnography) and mostly it was NGOs who active in advising and assisting villagers to gather and file their claims, thus themselves becoming significant actors in constituting ‘rural publics’ (Sivaramakrishnan 2000; Brara 2005). Most studies of FRA implementation across the country have focussed on this gap between the intent of the law and the abysmal state of its ‘implementation’— highlighting inconsistencies in the provisions of the law itself, the lack of fulfilment of important clauses such as rights to

‘community’ land, the lack of attention to the rights of non-scheduled tribal ‘other traditional forest-dwellers,’ and the marginalizing of claims of the claims of revenue villages (Rajshekhkar 2011; Sarker 2011; Chemmencheri 2013). These lacunae have been attributed to the obduracy of forest departments in giving up control (GOI 2010), and at least partially to the ‘lack of awareness’ or legal wherewithal of the principal target beneficiaries of this legislation—the rural, tribal, poor. These studies can be said to take what Sarat and Kearns term as an ‘instrumentalist’ perspective of the law, focussing on the extent to which the law is observed or not, thereby concentrating on certain kinds of legal objects such as rules. In contrast to the instrumentalist view, Sarat and Kearns distinguish the constitutive perspective of law which does not see the law as episodic or impinging from the outside, but rather ‘sees the everyday as providing a grounding set of tacit assumptions in legal life (Sarat and Kearns 2009, 10). Conversely, legal precepts, concepts, rules and practices also shape understandings, assumptions and conventions of everyday social relations (2009, 10-11), for instance, the way people think about promises as being constituted by regimes of contract etc. (2009, 10). The question of how the law and the everyday constitute each other is arguably an interesting line of inquiry to pursue in the context of legislation pertaining to Scheduled tribal areas and communities in India, such as the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act of 1996 (PESA), and the FRA. For instance, PESA essentially extended or devolved powers of local, village-level self-government to tribal or ‘scheduled’ areas and is intended to empower the village assembly or Gram Sabha in tribal areas to take decisions regarding the use and disposal of village natural resources, and to collectively sanction or veto any acquisition of land or diversion of forests for industrial or developmental purposes. A phrase I frequently heard in Gram Sabha meetings was “*Yeh PESA kshetra hai, sarkaar anumati ke bina jangal nahi le sakti hai*” (“This is a ‘PESA’ area, the state cannot ‘take’ forests without (our) permission). An entire ‘area’ was thus understood as coming under the ambit and protection

of a particular law, yet the statement reveals the fragility of this protection, that that was not in itself sufficient to protect village lands or forests from being acquired forcibly. PESA was formulated and formalized as legislation keeping in mind traditional structures of governance and dispute resolution that were thought to be already operative in tribal areas (Bhuria Committee Report). Conversely, the rules for conducting formal village assemblies enshrined in PESA (such as the requirement for fulfilment of quorum, the requirement that one-third members be adivasis or scheduled tribes and one-third women, the presence of a nodal officer either from the forest department or the concerned tribal development authority), shape the ‘commonsense’ norms of more informal adjudicative forums where people gather and assemble to discuss and settle issues of relevance and importance to them, particularly questions pertaining to forest, grazing lands and commons use.

Rather than as evidence of the gaps between law and life, of failures in the law’s imagination, or of the inadequacies of tribal forest-dwellers in realizing themselves as ideal subjects of law, the material presented in this chapter seeks to capture the diffuse ways in which the law comes to be embedded in and shape everyday state-society relationships. The law in question is the Forest Rights Act of 2006, which was a landmark legislation mandating the recognition and vesting of the tenurial rights of ‘forest-dwellers’ to tracts of forest land that they had been traditionally inhabiting and cultivating, with a view to ending the long-standing insecurity of their status as illegal encroachers, and reversing the ‘historic injustice’ of colonial and postcolonial forest laws. Chemmencheri notes:

“[T]he Act seeks to recognise the rights of ownership of an adivasi family if it proves that the claimed land belonged to it for three generations (defined as 75 years) before the cut-off date of 15 December 2005, a year before the Act came into force. The onus of proving ownership is on the adivasi family and is to be done through the FRA process, wherein proofs including official records as well as symbols, such as trees or shrines are arrayed in an official submission known as a claim. The FRA process is implemented through a decentralised three-tier structure consisting of the Forest Rights Committee (FRC) at the lowest level, the Sub-Divisional Committee at the intermediate level and the District Level Committee (DLC) at the highest level. The

FRC is to be constituted at the level of the Gram Sabha or the Village Assembly, where adults of a Gram Panchayat or village council assemble. A third of the members must be adivasis and a third women. The claims are verified by the FRC and then sent to the higher level bodies for granting Records of Rights. The decision of the DLC regarding any complaint is considered final” (Chemmencheri 2015, 437).

As we shall see, the actual engagement of adivasi claimants with this process was long drawn-out, stumbling, uneven, and riddled with confusion. The argument of the chapter is that this slow and incremental pace and space of democracy, rather than being seen as indicative of deficiencies in the law, or the lack of political will, or the incapacities of claimants, can be analyzed as a productive site from which to examine the ‘place of law’ in the flux of the everyday— as a contingent and strategic deployment, as both ‘threat and guarantee’ (Poole 2004), as material and immaterial trace, as an evocation, as rumor, and as a site of hope and the possibility of justice, in short, in all the forms it takes as it circulates in the ‘production of locality’ (Appadurai 1995). By complicating notions of what it is to follow a rule, what is the idea of suspension of the rule, and how failures and accomplishments of the law are experienced and interpreted by the intended beneficiaries of the law, this chapter tracks the activity and practice of citizenship as it actually occurs in the flux of local life, as an ongoing ‘*moral claim*’ Das (2011) made on an everyday state, rather than as a status, capacity or attribute that can be conferred only through constitutional and legal provisions.

Citizenship, Rule of Law, and the Politics of the Poor in Democratic India

In her essay ‘The Rule of Law and Citizenship in Central India - Postcolonial Dilemmas’ Nandini Sundar provides a useful overview of debates on how the law has emerged as a key site of struggle for groups with differential access to centers of power in postcolonial India (Sundar 2011). Following Baxi (1982) and Kannabiran (2004), she argues that in the postcolonial context in India, concepts such as rule of law and citizenship require

definitions that are substantive rather than merely formal and procedural, because they are based as much on expropriation and dispossession as on libertarian (negative liberties) liberal (representative or participatory democracy) or communitarian norms (recognition of communal identities competing with equality of all before law). The subaltern experience of law has been a particularly negative one (Sundar 2011, 421)— with the law being used as a tool of harassment in order to delay cases and prolong disputes (Baxi 1982, Cohn 1996); as a way of illegalizing the poor by criminalizing their livelihood and housing strategies (Ramanathan 2008. Holston 2008), and as a neoliberal ‘technology of control’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008). Conversely, Mitra (2010) notes that if independent India has been largely successful in transitioning from subjecthood to citizenship as a status and capacity in the sense of full legal, political and moral belonging, it has been because of the robustness of its Constitution, “laws linked to the state’s ‘social vision’, political participation and the judicialisation of rights (Mitra 2010, p. 47, Sundar 2011, p. 421). Nonetheless, Sundar notes that the state’s attitude to the law is opportunist, ‘with the state both invoking and violating its own laws to suit its own ends’ or the interests of those in power (Sundar 2011, 423). This is particularly so in high-stakes cases of land acquisition and diversion of forest lands for mining, conservation or other industrial needs, where the state routinely subverts, by stealth or brute force, legal provisions and safeguards enshrined in land acquisition and forest laws, such as say, the mandatory consent by village assemblies prior to acquisition (Cite examples). The deleterious effects of earlier state-led developmentalism and more recent neoliberal growth models, especially on the rural resource-dependent poor have intensified ‘citizenship struggles’ in which ‘non-violent’ social movements have come to play a key role. While iconic struggles of the late seventies and eighties such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) (Baviskar 1995) and the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand (Guha 1989) favored mass collective action, the more recent citizenship struggles and political involvements of the poor

have tended to actively and through ever more sophisticated strategies pressure the law into making substantive changes: one, by mobilising for “new legislation in protest against inherited colonial traditions”; second, by “defending state law against the state, especially...when it involves laws they [the poor] have participated in framing”; and third, in choosing between different frames of law, such as customary and state law” (2011, 419). The FRA, along with a slew of other legislations such as Right to Food, Right to Information, Right to Employment Guarantee, and Rights to Education that sought to expand the realm of democracy and citizenship for the poorest, can be considered a complex instance of the first kind of engagement with the law, ‘people-propelled legislation’ that Sundar talks about. Several scholars have now archived the sustained activism and negotiations by umbrella organizations of adivasi rights groups (notably, the Campaign for Survival and Dignity) who lobbied with bureaucrats, technocrats and the newly formed United Progressive Alliance government to get the law passed (Rajshekhar 2011). Once the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill was drafted, there was a series of debates on its provisions between academics, activists and spokespersons of adivasi communities, as well as intermediate parliamentary procedures before the Bill finally became law. In its final form, Sundar summarizes, the Act displays “a mix of several elements: a defence of a traditional moral economy around forests and new claims which are legally enshrined and which can be defended in courts. The forms of mobilisation also span the spectrum from more traditional demonstrations and sit-ins to new techniques like lobbying with government, spreading information through the internet and so on” (2011, 425). The second kind of movement-based engagement with law is defending the law against violations by the state. Again, this is particularly stark in cases of land acquisition and forest diversion, where the state routinely caves to corporate interests to subvert, threaten and suspend laws mandating the right to free assembly, public hearings, demand project-related environment

impact assessments, etc⁷⁷. Sundar cites adivasi groups' engagement with the law in the recent and infamous cases of the Vedanta corporation's acquisition of forests to set up an aluminium refinery in the Niyamgiri hills in Orissa and the proposed 12 million ton steel plant by the Korean company Posco also in Orissa. In the former case, a successful and high-profile global civil society upsurge led to the Ministry of Environment and Forests cancelling Vendanta's mining lease holding it to be in violation of the Forest Rights Act. In the case of Posco, the agitation was less 'successful', with the state government of Orissa violating multiple laws and protocols in suppressing the Anti Posco Struggle Committee's agitation, and permitting the construction of the steel plant to proceed⁷⁸. In the case of both Vendanta and Posco, adivasi citizens and citizens groups evoked the provisions of the recently enacted Forest Rights Act to protest the state's acquisition of their lands and forests. Sundar's argument is that such acts of citizenship consist in defending the law against the state, when 'the law itself is a weapon of choice for the state' (426). At the precise moment when it would be interesting to raise the conceptual problematic of the relationship between law, violence, exception and the reclamation of citizenship⁷⁹ Sundar's argument lapses into a kind of 'ethnographic refusal', abjuring 'thickness' of description in favor of a flat opposition between the state and those who inhabit an authentic oppositional space in relation to the state. How precisely does the state use law as a 'weapon'? How do communities, individuals and groups turn to the law, or call upon it in holding the state to account? Do such acts of

⁷⁷. Later in the chapter we will hear Balwant, a Samnapur-based activist echo this perspective when he says that the state 'sets the law aside' to suit its own purposes.

⁷⁸ Posco has now asked for its environmental clearance to be cancelled as the company has been unable to meet its targets, due to their inability to procure the land necessary for the project's continuance. Mired in political, legal and environmental troubles since the start of the project, the steel giant has pulled its investment from India. "Project in Odisha is over, says Posco", Business Standard (April 9, 2016). Accessed on August 21, 2017. http://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/project-in-odisha-is-over-says-posco-116040801130_1.html.

‘active citizenship’ (Eckert 2006) resolve straightforwardly into a ‘defense’ of the law? How precisely people turn to the law when the state is perceived to violate its own laws is a matter for investigation. In what specific actions and materialities does the naming and recognition of something as law stand out? In cases of imminent submergence of lands or dispossession or violent displacement, the body often has to become the voice of the poor, and registering protest corporeally acquires a certain urgency, but even in such cases the question of how exactly people ‘use’ law, and how body and language become implicated in their relationship to rules and norms, would have to be unpacked rather than assumed. For more ethnographically precise delineations of subalterns’ engagements with law and their own precarious legality in the Indian context, I draw on the work of Veena Das and Julia Eckert on the legal struggles of the urban poor in Delhi and Mumbai.

In an essay entitled ‘State, Citizenship and the Urban Poor’, Veena Das argues that the quotidian housing struggles of the poor in Delhi can help us re-evaluate the question of how the poor participate in politics. Das is interested ‘in the manner in which the notion of rights is now evoked among the urban poor and that many think that the state has promised them certain rights and that they have the standing (*haq*) to claim these rights; (Das 2011, 321). If citizenship is a claim and not a status that one either has or does not have, as Das argues, how do people make this claim as a form of appeal to the state? At stake, Das argues, is the relationship between life, law and the exception. One genealogy of thought tracing the question of how life is brought into the sphere of the political is given by Benjamin and Foucault, famously taken up by Agamben in his theorizing of the exception. The question of life in these arguments is unambiguously biological life and how it comes to be the subject of power. Agamben extends this genealogy to argue that sovereign power over life is really the power to kill, exemplified in the figure of Homo Sacer, the sacrificial being whose death cannot be assimilated into sacrifice for the good of the community - he is killed because the

sovereign has the right to take life without justification. Thus the relationship between sovereignty and law is defined by the state of exception, the sovereign is he who has the right to suspend the law.

If, however, rather than as power over biological life, one thinks of law as having a different kind of power, the power to shape social relations, we arrive at a more ‘constitutive’ picture of law in which legal subjects are created by the way in which laws furnish the criteria for everyday living—which may include what constitutes the right to life, a good life, and even what it means to live in relation to others. Instead of law as power over biological life, Das talks instead of the mutual absorption of the natural and the social, drawing on the idea of ‘forms of life’ wherein form refers to the dimension of ‘social conventions and institutions, and life to that which always inheres in a form even as it goes beyond them (Das 2011, 320). Thus, ‘[t]hough we might recognize and name something as law when the context makes it stand out (eg. In a court of law or in a legal document), we need to put that particular moment of recognition within the flux in which notions of life and notions of law unnoticeably and continually pass from one to another. This is the flux we might name as the everyday’ (2011, 321). How does this picture of how life and law bleed into each other in the ‘flux of the everyday’ help us when it comes to understanding the particular evocation of rights and law made by the poor? Here Das offers a fascinating counter to the idea of a rule and its suspension as envisaged within the framework of exception. Drawing on the notion of *apaddharma* from the Hindu laws encoded in the Manusmriti, Das notes that *apaddharma* refers to the rules to be followed in times of distress, when everyday life is threatened by invasions and afflictions and disasters of various forms and normal life has been suspended. There is a two-fold imagination of distress in the Hindu codes— one, when biological life is threatened, as in the case of, say, a famine. Second, when acts take place that violate the very basis of the social order— such as incest, or violating the bed of the preceptor (cite). In each

case, the Hindu codes offer a graded picture of the penance that must be offered to set right a wrong— an action is permitted which might not otherwise be, when biological life is threatened, or an action prescribed by which the order of things may be restored, immediately followed by a substitute rule in case the prescribed action cannot be carried out. What is so compelling about such a picture of rules and law is that they are inseparable from the sphere of everyday actions within which people search for and appeal to each other and to sovereigns or experts for solutions to their everyday predicaments— ‘the texture of moral claims’ (2011, 321).

So for instance, one common phrase evoked by jhuggi-jhopri residents of Delhi when trying to figure out ways of freeing themselves from the orbit of a rule that has been imposed on them is ‘*iska koi upaay bataaiye*’ (2011, 323). Das notes that while the phrase can be literally interpreted as ‘please show me a way out’, this would miss the point that here ‘an appeal is being made to expert knowledge through which a substitute rule can be formulated’ (323). From my own fieldwork, I could extract similar phrases directed at influential village members or to officials at community meetings or to development workers— “*ab kaise karhi, tai bataabe*”, (how do we go about things now, you tell us). The struggles of the jhuggi community to secure their claims to housing is narrated from the accounts of the leader of the housing welfare society, who manages, through various strategies and collaborations to secure a legal order temporarily staying the eviction of the unauthorized colony and its residents. The efforts of poor and long-time residents of marginal neighborhoods to secure their rights to residence consist of incremental acts of extending dwellings, procuring water and electricity connections and state identity documents that affirm their legality. The role of the state here is fascinating, for the state routinely suspends its adherence to the letter of the law in favour of a ‘diffuse commitment to preserving life’, both biological life and the life of a community. Thus, the ration cards that the Pradhan works so hard to secure are stamped

with residents' names, photographs and addresses, permitting them to collect subsidized grain from fair price shops, and at the same time the document bears the legend: 'this is not a ration card' (Das 2011, 324). The idea that the state must recognize residents as rights-bearing subjects and yet not affirm their legal status harks back to the discussion on rules and their suspension, that is disturbed in this case by the state's commitment to making sure some water and electricity and identity cards are made available to citizens who are not formally legal.

Comparably, many Samnapur villagers engaged in struggles to secure their legal claims over forest lands possessed evidence of occupation in the form of temporary leases, fine receipts, and eviction notices issued by the forest department in the course of the long history of sporadic 'regularization' of forest settlements. Under the Forest Rights Act (Rules 2012), such notices, receipts and leases could be furnished as evidence of longtime occupation. Interestingly, the struggle for many claimants in so-called 'forest villages' or unrecorded forest settlements or 'habitations' was to have their settlements notified as 'revenue villages' which would then be under the comparatively lenient administration of the revenue department. This would offer them more autonomy over their village spaces and surrounding areas and avail more easily of state benefits and development schemes that otherwise had to be routed through and sanctioned by the draconian forest department. "Once we become a revenue village (*rajaswa gram*), we can breathe easier" (*thodi khuli saans le sakenge*) an elder from Pipariya village told me. This articulation of a preferred shift to a less arbitrary sovereign to one more approachable, which would allow villagers to 'breathe easier,' is significant. It harks to more everyday dimensions of what Judith Butler calls a 'corporeal politics' (Cite). The struggles of rural forest-dwellers in contemporary India for survival and legitimacy of dwelling appear in some ways to closely parallel those of urban migrants to cities like Delhi. If the unauthorized residents of Delhi's slum colonies are

constantly preoccupied with ways to establish ‘temporary permanence’, the daily lives of forest-dwellers can be said to be shadowed by a permanent temporariness. In almost every village that I visited in the course of my fieldwork in Samnapur sub-district, there were at least some residents whose fields overlapped with reserved forest boundaries and whose farmlands and crops were vulnerable to being seized by the forest department. Inhabitants would narrate stories of face-offs with the forest department, who, generally in cahoots with rival village factions, would destroy standing crop, seize villagers’ implements, take them to the police station, etc. These conflicts varied in intensity and frequency, depending on how much of village land area overlapped with state forest boundaries. The more significant the overlap with state forest lands, the more precarious the status of the concerned settlements, habitation and farmlands. At various points in time however, since the 1980s, central forest policy had ordered the regularization of encroachments in forests, staying the eviction of forest-dwellers by issuing temporary leases and titles over particular tracts of land. In addition villagers maintained copies of fine receipts and records of court appearances, which served as proof of occupation. The forest rights act of 2006 allowed those Scheduled Tribes and OTFDs who could prove occupation of forest land before 2005 to claim permanent titles on such lands (the second chapter of the dissertation problematizes the idea of claiming property in forests). As many commentators have noted, the FRA marks a significant shift in the law’s perception of forest dwellers from ‘tolerated encroachers’ to their recognition as legitimate claimants whose claims over forests have temporal and moral priority to those of the state (cite). In that sense, this legislation goes further than previous policy shifts towards merely ‘regularizing’ encroachments within forests. But, as Balwant, the NGO activist I introduced in the previous chapter said to me in some anguish - *“jangal vibhaag kissi bhi manch par iss kanoon ko nahi manta”* (“Nowhere and under no circumstance does the forest department honor this law”). I use this passionate appeal to the state to honor the law, or at

least acknowledge that it is bound by law to take a step back and ask: what are the ways in which the state might let go unpunished, infringements to the law in favour of ‘a more diffuse commitment to preserving life’ (Das 2011:327). Conversely, how might we trace the affective force of law in the insistence by inhabitants of forest-fringe villages that they have a moral standing to call upon the state? In order to approach this question we have to turn to the sedimented histories of antagonism and accommodation that have characterized forest-dweller - state relations and to the flux of everyday life which sustains these relations.

Unruly Natures and Everyday Resistance

One day early in my fieldwork (April 2011), the resident activist and staff member of Ekta Parishad, Meera, summoned me urgently by phone. “There’s been an uprising in Titrahi,” she said brusquely. “The villagers have had their crops razed by the forest wallahs, and they’ve *gheraaoed* (surrounded) them. We should go.” Titrahi was a forest village about 20 kilometers from Samnapur. After urgent phonecalls to local journalists to come and cover the situation, and an aggressive phone conversation with a staffer at the nearby forest range office, Meera assessed that we must join the fray, and in several hours’ time we were disgorged by an overcrowded bus at the foot of the hill that led steeply up to the village of Kanchanpur Titrahi.

A tense atmosphere appeared to prevail as we approached the clearing where the Baiga hamlet of Tritrahi was nested. Men sat in a circle, a knot of women gathered a little further away, some stood leaning against the doorways of their homes. At the center of the circle was a woman I recognized as Shambai, a neighbourhood representative in panchayat level politics (ward panch). Shambai was distraught, her clothes ripped, her sari askew, and she was clearly in quite a state, gesticulating and shouting. Meera approached the circle slowly, listening attentively to the agitated conversation around her. After greeting the

assembled villagers with Jai Jagat, the Ekta Parishad greeting, she started her inquiries, trying to piece together the chain of events. We learned that the village Forest Protection Committee, currently under the control of the Thakur community, had reported to the Samnapur range office that Baiga villagers, particularly two of them, Ratnu and Ramratan, were illegally cultivating crops in the forest. The range office had dispatched manpower (*amlā*) a couple dozen police officers to inspect the situation. Egged on by the Thakurs, who were enraged at the encroachment of Baiga fields into their grazing grounds, the forest officers decided to destroy the standing crop by letting loose a herd of cattle to graze. Shambai jumped into the narrative:

I had just put the rice on to boil, my son was had gone for a bath; he came running back to tell me that there were cattle all over my crops, ten, twenty, thirty of them. *Bas*, what could I do, I took my hasia (sickle) and ran to the fields, and soon there were more, in other people's fields as well. *Eyyyyy*, what are they doing, I thought! I raised the alarm, and others joined me. We chased the forest-wallahs but by that time, there had already been too much damage to our crops...*Kahaan jahi ab?*" - Where do we go now? ...*Apne mehnat-mazdoori se jotaai-nindaai kare han, behenji, sab barbaad kar dis, humaar ghar parivaar vale hun, baal- bache, bahu-toori pet se hai. Kahin la khilaabo sab la!!* - We tilled the ground and tended the crop, our sweat and labor, they ruined it all, I have a family...my daughter-in-law is pregnant..from where will I feed everyone!

Ratnu (Shambai's husband): "They tell us we can't grow crops because it is forest land. Since the time of our forefathers we have been ploughing that land".

Meera asked to be taken to the scene of destruction, and led by Shambai and her husband, we trooped to view the damage, followed by a good number of villagers. We arrived the top of a gently sloping hill, which gave on to a vista of neatly demarcated fields, golden brown with the late lentil crop. Cropped area amounting to about 20 hectares, according to Meera's quick visual estimate, had been damaged. Meera asked the villagers if had any documentation for the land. Ratnu responded that he had an encroachment fine receipt, a challan, dating back to 1998. About half a dozen other villagers too said that they had challan slips but no formal title for the land they had been cultivating. From the agitated

talk of the villagers three things were clear: first, that the contested lands had been under cultivation for several years and formed the mainstay for many of the families who were present there, second, that similar incidents had occurred in the past, and finally that there existed little formal record of rights to these lands.

After a few remarks intended to be reassuring of Ekta Parishad's support and backing, Meera told the villagers that they should gather whatever documentation they had as proof of occupation— encroachment fine receipts, notifications for eviction, etc., since these would serve as evidence of occupation when villagers filed their claims under the Forest Rights Act.

Listen up, all of you!" said Meera to the assembled villagers. "The forest department cannot do this. This is *anyaay* (injustice), and we don't have to bear it. You did the right thing, you drove away the cattle that were destroying your crops, but you also surrounded the forest officials and threatened them with your implements. That is violence (*hinsa*), and Rajaji had forbidden the use of violence. We must learn to make our demands forcefully, but peaceably.

There was a belligerent clamor from the group - "Why should we keep quiet, how can we...when they come and take what is ours!? *Hum toh ladhi, hathyaar uthaahi*. We will fight, we will pick up arms."

I sensed some indecision in Meera, which I attributed to the conflict between her sympathies with the righteous anger of the villagers, and her commitment to the non-violent doctrine of the organizational leadership.

Her phone rang and she held a hasty conversation to one side.

Someone called out: "I have just heard that they are on their way here, the forest department officials".

One of the assembled men said derisively, prefacing his comments with spitting out tobacco juice:

Today we have shown them, that's why they are bothering to come all the way...otherwise they'd never climb up all this way, the range officer is so fat. And no vehicle will come up this far". There was a titter from the assembled crowd. Meera resumed: "We must *show* them how much damage has been done, Shambai, take them to your fields, cry and act dramatic, it will drive the point home (*aisa hi bartaav karo*)". She pointed to Shambai's torn blouse and sari which were askew.

Stay like that, let them see how much damage their force has done and we will also make sure the journalist covers it. But on no account must there be *hinsa* (violence), do not pick up your *hasiyas* and *tangiyas* (sickles and axes), otherwise they will say you are in the wrong and confiscate your implements. Are you all aware of the new forest law (*van kanoon*)? It is called the Forest Rights Act (*Van Adhikaar Adhiniyam*) and all adivasis who have occupied/cultivated forest land since 2005 or prior to that, are entitled to a *patta* (title) for that land. *Yeh appka haq hai* (this is your right) and nobody can take it from you.

“We have filed claims... nothing has come of it, our forms are languishing in the collectorate. The “madam” at the collectorate just says one thing or another is missing and we have to keep on doing rounds (*chakkar kaatna parhi*)”

“*Aa gaye jungle*” (“The forest officials are here”).

Meera: “On no account will we go down to meet them, they must come up! We have tilled and ploughed this land, it is the work of our limbs, and they cannot even exert themselves to walk a couple of kilometers? Let them come up, we will stay here.

They can lose some weight”. Laughter followed her last comment.

The boy was dispatched to summon the forest officials and guards, and we sat around waiting, while young men described with some glee how they had chased the forest force and cattle down to the Thakur hamlet, and the pandemonium that had ensued. However, when I asked if no Thakurs had objected, they answered with some belligerence, ‘Why will they object, it is their cattle on our land.’ In due course, the SDM (Sub-Divisional Magistrate) and DFO (Divisional Forest Officer) accompanied by the forest guard and two police officers appeared, followed a little later by LN, the journalist from Dindori on his motorbike. Out of breath from the long climb, they glanced warily at Meera, myself, and the two junior staff of EP who had accompanied us. ‘Please come,’ said Meera grimly. ‘We have all been waiting for you. Please tell us, why have you razed these villagers’ crops?’

‘And who is madam?’ ‘*Madam kaun hain*’, asked the official. Meera introduced herself as a *karyakarta* of Ekta Parishad (you must have heard of them - *naam suna hoga*), and me as a researcher new to the area. The DFO asked, “Madam what are you doing here? This is a private issue between these people (*yeh in logon ka niji mamla hai*).” Meera bristled at once. “How can you say that? This is a community (*samoohic*) matter. Are you not aware that under the FRA it is illegal to raze standing crop?”

FD official: “Yes, we are aware of the *van kanoon*, the forest law, but this is encroachment (*atikraman*), these people’s fields are in forest department land, and they indiscriminately cut trees for firewood. Go into any of their houses, and you will see fully chopped trees. Where these people are farming is common land, so naturally other people’s cattle will pass through.”

At this point Shambai’s husband cut in: “Sahib, this has been our land for generations. We have lost our standing crop yet again, what are we to do? We haven’t cut any trees to farm this land, this land has been in our family for years.” There was a buzz of agreement from the gathered crowd. At this point the police officers moved forward, their batons slightly raised. Shambai charged ahead, ‘come and hit me, just try. Our entire crop is ruined, we have nothing to eat for next season and you come with your sticks and lathis. Come and hit me’. She sat abruptly down and began to wail, beating her breasts. The men around tried to restrain her:

The SDM and DFO retreated slightly. “Why are you creating such a commotion? You are occupying this land illegally, we have received a complaint and we are just acting

on that as per the rules”. Turning to me: “Madam, we also understand that people have to eat, they have families to feed, where will they go. There is plenty that we ignore, they take wood from the forests we say nothing, they fell entire trees, we say nothing... *Chalo*, we even say ‘*aap apna kuch jeene khaane ke liye kheti kar li jiye*’ (‘Do farming to feed yourselves and your families’). But when they start encroaching on other villagers’ land, start destroying the forests, setting off fires, how do we ignore that, we have to stop it”.

Older man turning to the officials: ‘Sahib, the rules have changed, we also know that (*niyam badli se, hum bhi jaant hun*). Our claims forms are with the District office, we have ratified them in the Gram Sabha, the patwari and beat guard have measured and demarcated our lands. We too have followed all the rules (*hum bhi niyam se chalt hai*). He turned to the local beat guard— “You, lad, you’re from Patan (the next village) aren’t you? Did you or did you not sign our forms and come with the patwari to measure out lands?”

The other villagers corroborated loudly- ‘Yes yes! Indeed he had been there! Domari’s son he is!’ The young man who had been shifting uncomfortably now looked quite terrified. Beat guards, the lowest rung of the forest bureaucracy were often from villages themselves and inhabited a position of uncomfortable and tentative authority over those whom they had grown up amidst. Usually protected by their official uniforms and motorbikes, sticks and other accouterments of power, sometimes they were dragged in public and forced to account for being from amongst the villagers themselves.

- | | |
|----------|--|
| DFO | That’s all fine, but you can’t create <i>danga</i> (commotion) like this....you can’t attack the police, that is a serious offence. |
| Shambai | “Eyyy...if they destroy our food, what are we supposed to do, stand by and watch?” |
| DFO | “Also, it is your own neighbors who have reported you. They say you are trespassing on their land. Unka bhi haq banta hai (they have rights too).” |
| Shamwati | “They are jealous! They do magic and routinely destroy our crops. They can’t bear to see us eat and live off the land, we eat, their stomachs burn.” |

Meera, stepping forward again, her right hand with its index finger pointing at the DFO as if in warning (Fig.11).

‘Nobody will pay any fine, is that clear? You will dismiss any charges against these people (pointing to the assembled villagers). And if you harass them again, you will have all of us, *janta ki takat* (the power of the people) to contend with’

correct, this was their food for the winter and spring, valuable lentil. *Aap chalen*, let us go, and discuss this calmly”. Disgruntled but mollified, the officials retreated, accompanied by LN the journalist, while we stayed back.

There was a general feeling of triumph in the air, people sat around in little groups, talking loudly. Meera said a few more words about the mobilization for the *padyatra* (foot march) in 2012, told the villagers to contact her if they were troubled, and that she would be monitoring the situation closely from Samnapur. After about 4 hours in the Baigan tola, we made our way down, heading west towards the setting sun, all of us excited and nervous from the events of the afternoon. We surveyed the destroyed crop in the field. ‘That was quite some performance, huh, Maya,’ said Meera, ‘Plenty for you to write about.’

Sure enough, there was a news item in the next day’s newspaper, where the incident was reported in full detail with dramatic pictures of Meera wagging her finger at forest officials and a distraught Shambai crying with her clothes askew, and Baiga men and women rushing at cattle with their sickles and axes and sticks. [attach image].

Several things now strike me as noteworthy in the almost theatrical scene that unfolded over the course of that hot April afternoon, not least of which was that the distressed villagers themselves, at moments, perceived the unfolding events as a kind of theater. The atmosphere was thick with a sense of anticipation that something of significance had happened, and of what might happen next. People stood around or squatted, watching Shambai’s dramatic rendition from under the thatched awnings of their homes, or from the little circle that had formed around her performance.

When we tried to piece together what had happened upon our arrival into the hamlet, the responses at first seemed vague, accusing non-specific perpetrators— “*woh log karhi*” (“they did this”), “*samitee waalon ki chaal*”, (“a plot by the Samiti members”), “*door se pehchaan gaye hoon, force bhijwaayi se*” (“I spotted them from afar, the force”), “*Main jaanhoon yeh kin-kin ki soch hai*” (“I know who all is behind this”). Confusing to an outsider, the words and phrases used to describe the chain of events were drawn from a world in which this manner of upset and disruption were familiar, even anticipated. Meera’s efforts to reassure the villagers of Ekta Parishad support and her dropping of information about the Forest Rights Act appeared superfluous given that many of the villagers were already in the

process of filing their claims, but important in the context of what I discuss subsequently in the chapter, relating to the horizontal transfer of the knowledge of rights through rumour. Her efforts to mould the scene into a more appropriate register of non-violent resistance and school villagers into more recognizable forms of protest were ineffectual as the distribution of bodies and words took on their own life— some people looked on at the unfolding drama lethargically, others were incensed and energetic, yet others remained peripheral to the scene, watchful and alert— many among them were participants in similar challenges to the FD's seemingly arbitrary deployment of force. We were outsiders, stepping into and struggling to understand the ongoing histories of relationships between village factions and the forest officials that the present event was enfolded in.

Despite the best intentions of organizations that prided themselves on being 'social movements' as opposed to 'NGOs' [tania li antipolitics vs. political practice], their successes were contingent upon the uneven ways in which they shaped landscapes of local democratic politics and their absorption into local social and moral worlds. As I have mentioned earlier in the dissertation, at the time of my fieldwork, EP staff members were busy trying to ensure the participation of Dindori villagers in the 2012 Jana Styagraha land march to Delhi. The ambition of the march organizers was to gather more than a hundred thousand people from impoverished rural districts and walk for a month from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh to New Delhi. Meera had been about three years in Samnapur at the time, having taken over as coordinator of EP activities for Mahakaushal from the previous activist who had retired. Many of her subordinate staff members who were from Samnapur and surrounding areas had been working in the area much longer, and were sometimes dismissive of her leadership and she was kept hard at work trying to establish her authority. The staff member in charge of the cluster of villages that included Titrahi, was known to be an alcoholic and negligent of his duties. He was not present on this occasion. So Meera was aware at the time of our arrival

that Titrahi was not a ‘mazboot’ or strong field for EP activities, a ‘*samarpit gaaon*’ like some others, familiar with the modes of peaceful protest, marches, rallies and public hearings favored by Ekta Parishad. She nonetheless continued her attempts to mediate the situation—asking Shambai to stay in character as a distressed woman mandhandled by the police, instructing the villagers in how they should behave when encountering the officials.

When the forest officials arrived on the scene, a specific ecology of claiming rights and entitlements came into play that escaped the disciplined indiscipline of protest that EP activists sought to enjoin in their followers. The villagers had filed claims under the FRA, but did not appear to have much faith that they would get their titles any time soon. They were aware that they would have to make several trips to Dindori collectorate, their forms would be returned to them for insufficient documentation, then there would have to be another round of meetings and gatherings to collect money for photographs and photocopies, They were familiar with the repetitive and tedious labors involved in securing government-provided services and entitlements. The villagers here were appealing to a different idea of *niyam* or rule which called for immediate acknowledgement— which was that they had been following the unwritten rule of taking only what was essential for maintaining their biological existence—*jeene khaane ke liye*, and the state must see and respond to their suffering. The appeal to the state was to honor its commitment to preserve life and allow the community to carry on meeting its basic needs. The sense of injustice and violation were more in the nature of consternation at the routine betrayal of proximate oppressors — in one case through the exercise of sovereign violence, and in the other, the more diffuse malevolent intent of neighbors. The accusations of injustice and magic and appeals to justice were replete with bodily metaphors— the fruits of sweat and physical exertion gone to waste, the question facing a woman of how to feed her pregnant daughter-in-law, the fatness of officials that distanced them from the bodily labors required to sustain the everyday life of indigent tribal

farmers and insulated them from their suffering. Affects such as jealousy were somatized, as villagers calculated which neighbors might have plotted their downfall— “We live off the forest, their stomachs burn”. When Shambai was alerted to the oxen rampaging over her fields, she was at work setting the day’s rice to boil and her son was on his way to have a bath. When the officials took a step towards her, she moved towards them as though daring them to harm her physically.

On their part, the officials acknowledged that villagers needed to draw on forests for their sustenance, and that they did indeed look the other way when villagers infringed on forest rules, but how could they do so when the rights of other communities were infringed? At this point, one of the villagers changed tack— seamlessly switching from this register of appeal, to invoking the law— the rules had changed now, the law was in their favor. To this the official responded dismissively, clearly secure in his knowledge and experience of how long procedure would take. If villagers had filed the claims properly then they would get the awaited result, in the meantime, they could not resort to violence. The scene of confrontation that I have just sketched might offer a provocation for thinking about the question of how biological life is brought into the political realm as a matter of the mutual absorption of the natural and the social, rather than as sovereign power over biological life. The body here figures and is deployed in strategic ways in the transfiguration of ordinary laborers into political subjects who aver that they have a moral claim on the state; the body also serves as a conduit for political and magical affects that suture subjects to familiar social and political worlds.

It struck me that the hostility that the forest officials displayed was less directed towards the villagers and more reserved for Meera, an interloper into what would have otherwise been a private matter between the state and villagers, resolvable in a language recognizable to both parties. In interposing herself (an activist with suspect politics) and a

journalist in the form of a witness, into the situation, Meera made the matter public, *saamudaayik*— and this was what the DFO, SDM and their posse perceived as threatening.

A few days later, waiting for a bus at a tea stall with my friend Kalawati, I met Shambai at a bus stop, walking. Different from her tattered clothes from a few days ago, she looked to be dressed in her best, wearing much jewelry, ribbons in her hair, and swinging a handbag. She walked slowly, swaying as though to the sounds of music. I called out to her, at which point she swayed towards me, and greeted me effusively and poetically, singing a line from the wedding she had just been to. The tea stall owner, amused, said, “I don’t think you’re going to get much sense out of her today madam. *Aaj toh shambai apni duniya mein magan hai* (Today Shambai is lost in her own world). When I mentioned to Meera that I had run into Shambai in an intoxicated state she said ruefully, “so much for her energy and passion on the day (*ek din ka josh*)...the very next day she’s downed it in drink. Well, at least we made some sort of showing of strength in front of the forest department... it’s a miracle they all managed to stand together the other day”.

The previous chapter traced the colonial antecedents of contemporary improvement projects that localized the general recalcitrance to improvement of the landscape and its inhabitant on to Baigas as shifting cultivators and forest-dwellers. In this chapter we follow the emergence of the Baiga as the ‘prickly subjects of rights’ (McLure) in the context of the contested rural publics that form around the question of access to forests and village commons.

Engagements with Procedure: On Rule-following and Unorganized Collective Action

A few weeks after the coupe-felling incident that I opened this chapter with, Balwant and I attended a village assembly in Ranjra village in which villagers talked about their experience with filing claims under the Forest Rights Act. Barelal and Lalla Singh, a

resourceful sibling duo, shared their views in a freewheeling interview, revealing, for villagers struggling daily with the opacity of procedure, an extraordinarily clear sense of what the law actually *did*. I present some excerpts from the discussion:

- Maya How many individual titles have been allotted in this village? And how many acres for community title?
- Bare 54 individual titles, all for less than the amount we claimed. No community titles have been awarded.
- Maya How much did you claim under community rights?
- Bare All the area we use for our *nistaar*, I don't remember the acreage...
- Balwant Have you sold any mahua? How's the tendu harvest?
- Lalla There is no mahua in this forest, we have to buy it from Bamhni market, tendu we have, yes. I know how to make a tonic out of tendu that the forest guard wants for his ailments (sniggering - *shakti barhane ke liye*, to better his performance)].
- Maya Would you say that troubles with the forest department have lessened as a result of getting titles? Have they stopped bothering you? The March incident suggests that you have recurring troubles with them...
- Lalla They... thought they could get away with just giving us titles, that too mostly for less than the amount we claimed. The March fight was for the forest...that you can't do *manmani* (as-you-wish) coupe-felling. It is our forest. But yes, the pressure (*dabaav*) has lessened. Threats and beatings have lessened. Since this law, their sly-ness and smartness (*chalaaki, hoshiyaari*) has come down a bit. Now they even come and sit with my old mother, saying, "*Amma ji* you only have to save us from the attacks of these villagers".
- Maya Did you undertake the procedure (filling out claims forms, attaching supporting documentation) on your own? Individually? Did any government body or NGO help you?
- Lalla No...only Sir (pointing to Balwant) helped. He brought us the news, told us to organize ourselves and held meetings and trainings informing us about the procedure. From the beginning, we did it together (*saarvajanik roop se*). The bulk of the 'load' for all the running around falls onto a few '*jagruk*' (aware, awakened) people—we have to prepare a prototype, then tell everyone, 'look, all of you now copy this'.
- Balwant The forest department is completely '*haavi*' (a heavy, oppressive presence) in these areas. Since a long time forest villages have been labor reserves for the FD. Their '*vyavhaar-aacharan*,' 'role-response,' has been, 'you exist for us'— whether it was coupe-felling, or simply illegal logging or extraction. Villagers had no say. Any refusal to do the forest department's bidding - there would be burning down of villages, destruction of crops - they treated humans like animals

Balwant continued: "Several things happened around 1999. A massive 'grassroots' protest across Madhya Pradesh was organized asking for people's sovereignty over land, forest and water resources. Ekta Parishad took the lead role in this. The immediate trigger was the World-Bank funded Madhya Pradesh State Forestry Project which was so inimical to tribal-forest interests that several adivasi sanghathan (tribal collectives) bonded together to contest it. It was during this period that the issue got hijacked by politicians from different parties who realized that the forest issue could be milked for adivasi or tribal votes. When the FRA was finally enacted, 'the law arrived' (*kanoon toh aa gaya*), but there was no changing the FD's oppressiveness toward forest inhabitants. The Tribal Development Authority, the nodal agency in charge of 'implementation' was given no training, directives or infrastructure to actually oversee the implementation of this law.

In the midst of this, the elections for the Madhya Pradesh state legislature took place in 2008. The MP state government (a BJP government) in order to take credit from the Central government made a hasty announcement that Gram Sabhas must be convened all across MP between 26 January 2008 and 2 February, 2008. Forest Rights Committees must be constituted for each village, and claims forms filed and processed. Needless to say, this could not happen, the timeline was unrealistic. Amongst us peoples movements there was total confusion. We thought the Forest *Rights* Committees mandated by this Act were the Forest *Protection* Committees instituted under the older, co-management arrangements funded by the World Bank. This was a major error because the FPCs were basically employees of the Forest Departments. Thus, began our process of learning. We held national consultations, meetings, understood what was the 'proof' demanded by the law, and communicated our knowledge to villagers. Take Barelal for instance, he has passed 8th grade, and yet when it came to putting down his name on the claims form, he just wrote down 'Bare'. Similarly, people can identify their fields simply by looking and pointing and farming. They know what is theirs. It is harder to translate this knowledge on the claims forms where you have to list acreage, what are the distinguishing features of this plot, etc."

Lalla Sir is right. Nobody told us...Sir called meetings, that's how we knew. We had no idea how to fill forms, what *saaksh* (proof to

attach). We just kept doing it wrong and our claims got rejected again and again.

Maya How many times did your claims get rejected?

Barelal Three - no, four times. How many times we've hauled sacks of claims forms to the block-level office, I've forgotten even. And then more trips for photocopies, stamps, photographs. We had to call a photographer to the village to take pictures, had to pay him also. But he stayed the night here and seemed to have a good time.

Maya Did you have to hold many Gram Sabha meetings to get your claims ratified?

Lalla Yes...

Bare Yes... we had many meetings to fill out forms and cross-check each others' forms. In the last round, the officials themselves took pity on us and held an FRA camp in Kanhari village. They brought out all our forms in big sacks - And then told us what we had to attach as proof.

Maya What documents did you attach?

Bare Voter identity cards, ration cards, caste and domicile certificates... We made drawings of our fields and signs (*chinh*) on the fields like bunds, trees and streams.

Maya How did you have your fields measured? Did someone from the FD come to the village?

Bare *Arre*, don't even ask, sister. The beat guard made the maps, but not before we went to him again and again. The forest deputy-ranger said get your fields demarcated by the revenue official and the patwari said I won't intervene because this is forest department territory. Then they asked us for documents and proofs of occupation so that they could carry out measurements. I told him, the whole point of asking you to measure our lands is so that you can give us proof (Barelal's frustration was evident from his tone).

Maya Was the mapping and measuring done individually for all the claimants?

Barelal [Laughing], No, only a few. First time round the Patwari had a GPS machine with which he did the measuring, but that didn't work properly. Then we just asked him to use bamboo poles. The beat guard, the one actually standing with us tallying the measurements, was so confused his head was spinning (laughter from the assembled group). Eventually, most of us have got more or less the same amount (2.5 hectares). There are others who have got nothing.

Maya Why were their claims refused?

Barelal The CO madam scolded us that every claim had something or the other missing. This paper that paper, once it was the statement of elders, once it was the panchnama, this and that... just all manner of trouble (*pareshani*). It was right before the elections that we petitioned her, and she was very sweet and said, 'I will take care of these forms for you, if you all have to do this then what are we

sitting here for?’ I think it was because it was right before the election. This was all right before they returned all the forms in Kanhari, and we had to start all over again.

Let us pause here to reflect on the discussion thus far. How might this interview help us reflect on subaltern engagements with state and law that problematize the binary between resistance and compliance? While Balwant insisted on a gap between the ‘arrival of the law’ and its lack of substantive, structural impact in terms of how the state perceived forests and forest-dwellers, villagers themselves seemed to have a more shaded, thoughtful picture of how the accomplishments and failures of law seeped into each other. While their earlier face-off with forest officials might suggest an unambiguous sense of ‘ownership’ over forests, this discussion suggested a certain resignation that wresting tracts of land from the vice-grip of the forest department would be a piecemeal, ongoing process. Villagers did not seem surprised that titles had been awarded for less than the claimed amounts of forest land, that several claims had been repeatedly refused. Rather, they narrated their engagement with procedure as a series of specific tasks that had to be undertaken as part of daily activity, in the pursuit of specific goals— walking, long bus rides, assembling for debate and discussion, coaxing officials, filling out and signing forms, waiting around, bringing the photographer to the village, etc. Can these actions be reduced to what Sundar (2011, 420) calls a disempowering ‘proceduralism’ that segues into the ‘iron cage of bureaucracy’? I find it more useful to think of these actions of villagers as ‘practice movements,’ forms of unorganized collective action ‘distinct from social movements’ that are a direct expression of ‘goals in practice’ and are orientated towards ‘some improvement of everyday possibilities’ (Eckert 2012). These acts are ‘both part of everyday living and stand out from quotidian practices’— they are transgressive in that they are pushing for some expansion of the possibilities of living, and in bringing about some changes in the given order of things - ‘the material arrangements of space, property relations, status orders’ (cite). The transgressiveness of such

acts does not necessarily lie in authentic spaces of pure resistance. Following several anthropologists who have famously critiqued the preoccupation with resistance (the resistance of resistance) Eckert notes that a narrow focus on resistance ‘eludes possibilities of reciprocal orientation and force of cooperation’ (2012, 572). Second, resistant and compliant practices are not easily distinguished— for instance, are all expressions of an awareness of domination, resistance? (2012, 572). Limiting ourselves to practices that challenge the status quo, Eckert notes, we run the risk of eliding the question of how exactly ‘intentions matter’ (2012, 572), and if whether observable changes are actually the consequence of resistance. Resisters, as Sherry Ortner has famously noted, ‘do more than resist’ (Ortner 1995). Not only do they have their own politics— frictions and factions— there are also projective dimensions to their actions that get sidestepped in the exclusive focus on the resistant dimensions of action. These actions point towards ‘goals perceived as worthwhile in themselves rather than simply an aversion or avoidance of status quo’ (Ortner 1995). Though the resistant and transformative potentials of ordinary acts have been immortalized as ‘weapons of the weak’ as James Scott calls the ‘avalanche of petty acts of insubordination’ and Michel De Certeau’s ‘tactics,’ Eckert suggests that a desire to perceive spaces as authentic zones of resistance obscures both questions of intents and effects. Is all awareness of domination, resistance? Conversely, is all incremental change necessarily transformative and the effect of resistance? Eckert suggests that ‘appropriation’ may be more suited to capturing what practice movements actually accomplish— which is not aversion to institutions as such but rather an incremental expansion of possibilities for an improved life (Eckert 2015). Appropriation can connote a ‘taking over’ which has affinities with the space-expanding possibilities of encroachment, as discussed in Chapter 2, and it can also connote a ‘taking up’ of practices, making them one’s own in specific ways that make more room for manoeuvring and movement. During my fieldwork, Ekta Parishad activists were busy

organizing a land march, a *padyatra* called the Jan Satyagraha, People's March for Truth. During meetings and trainings held in villages in Samnapur, EP activists would tirelessly emphasize the transgressive potential of walking as a specific 'weapon of the weak', a capacity that the poor could strategically deploy to resist the land-grabbing practices of the state. Showing images of previous marches and yatras, which were usually of the leader of EO, prominent land rights activist P.V. Rajagopal [insert image], usually photographed from the back, addressing vast crowds, activists tried to fire up the imaginations of the villagers attending these meetings in order to try secure their commitment to participate in the 2012 march. Most EP members in the village of Madagaur where I conducted long-term fieldwork diligently showed up for meetings, however much they might privately grumble or show skepticism about the lack of efficacy of EP's efforts on their behalf. As I recollect the many EP meetings I attended, what strikes me now as significant is less the grandiose rhetoric around the march, as the seemingly simple fact that villagers 'showed up'— even if they came late, or shuffled in, or sat around chewing tobacco, apparently lackadaisical or even disinterested in the proceedings. I would like to draw parallels between this ordinary business of 'showing up' by Madagaur's villagers, the repeated perambulations of Ranjra's villagers as they went about trying to file their claims correctly, and the angry gathering at Titrahi where villagers made claims on FD officials to recognize their bodily suffering. Each case appears to support a picture of what it means for the poor to 'do politics' in which they take steps, literally, to safeguard and expand, even if only incrementally, spaces for their life possibilities. Eckert calls these 'practice movements', that are not easily encapsulated within binaries of resistance or compliance, but involve the transfiguration of quotidian acts— when do walking or assembling or measuring fields come to be seen as threatening, for instance— into actions that people take to attain specific goals. The picture that people retain of a good life need not align with the normative imagination of social movements, and may demand a

responsiveness from the state that is drawn from sedimented and remembered histories of engagement and encounter, rather than to a normative body of rules and laws. What is interesting of course, is the picture of rules, laws and their suspension and violation that *does* circulate in such encounters. So, in Titrahi when FD officials accused villagers of *encroachment*, we can perhaps read Shambai's response as defending rather, her *appropriation*, a taking over and taking up of space that was necessary for survival, the maintenance and support of a family. Ratnu, her husband, cannily interjects with '*niyam kanoon badle hain, main bhi jaanoon*', 'The law and the rules have changed, I also know that'. The task is to understand how these moments of naming and recognition circulate within more diffuse understandings of rights and obligations. In this context, the law circulates within the flux of life not as an external impingement but in the way that it furnishes and constrains the conditions of life itself (legality of residence, access to resources) and shapes social relations. Contestations over rule-following and the suspension of a rule, rather than belonging to the domain of exception and life as bifurcated into the biological and the political, are absorbed into the daily negotiations over maintaining and preserving life. Julia Eckert's view of practice movements evokes a closely related picture of quotidian activities that press the law into action through their appropriative and transformative potential— while not falling easily into categories of resistance or compliance.

CODA

On a sunny September morning free from the rains, close to the end of my fieldwork, Balwant and I found ourselves in an almost ethereally beautiful clearing full of wild flowers, somewhere between the villages of Ranjra and Pondi. As we clambered down, slipping on the moss and lichen, Balwant pointed out to me a particular patch of rock against the water. It turned out that the water was an illusion of the way sunlight fell on the rock face and made it shimmer, there was no water there at all. As we waded our way across the pool, I noticed several trees with colored cloth tied round them. Balwant told me that the women of Pondi had come up with their own system of marking trees to counteract the markings of the forest department. “Those trees that have bands around them cannot be felled. They have tied ‘rakhi’⁸⁰ to the trees. This is their way of sending a warning (*chetaavni*) to the Forest Department not to destroy their forest, which is their kin, of protecting the resource that nourishes them”.

In a later interview with a Pondi villager, I asked about the cloths, and her explanation was somewhat different: she told me of the day that the village gram sabha (village council) had met and formulated a set of rules to safeguard trees from felling— not just by the forest department, but also by the villagers themselves. “So we tied cloths round the trees, to remind ourselves that we shouldn’t cut them”.

I sensed a difference in how Balwant (who was present at many of these meetings), chose to interpret this action, as a clearly political act animated by primordial attachments to the forest, and how the villager herself saw it— as a reminder to *herself* should she *forget* into wanting to fell the tree. To me, her gesture seemed to draw from quite a different register of

⁸⁰ A colored string or band tied by women around the wrists of their brothers for the ceremony of Rakhi, a harvest-time festival popular in urban and rural north India.

life - it reminded me of the knots that women would tie on the edges of their sarees to remind themselves that they had something to remember. Throughout my fieldwork, I searched for moments and instances where Baiga farmers and forest workers might, individually or collectively, reflect on their relationships with the natural landscapes they inhabit, and the forces that affect these relationships— either by way of myths and stories, or in their engagement with the institutions governing their relationships to nature, or in their political involvements. I was searching, in other words, for some kind of ‘ethics of nature’ that would make itself available through a stable cosmological or political archive. I was disappointed in my search, for such moments were few and far between— myths and stories were sparse, people rarely appeared to work with any sense of an explicitly ethical disposition towards their environments. Villagers generally expressed reluctance and tentativeness, intermixed with excitement, at the prospect of any kind of collective action that involved explicitly challenging or confronting the state to ask for their entitlements, especially relating to the Forest Rights Act. Moments (such as in the second chapter), where rules for the use of common lands were elaborated and discussed, seemed more a contest of exclusion and how to retain control over meagre landholdings, and how intimate knowledge of the dealings of one’s neighbors could help consolidate this fragile sense of control.

In a recent, comprehensive overview of scholarship dealing with the entangled genealogies of ethics and nature in South Asia, K. Sivaramakrishnan discusses key sites where something like an ethics of nature in the South Asian context are being worked out, elaborated and formulated (Sivaramakrishnan 2015). These include law and jurisprudence, religion and tradition, and emergent forms of civic and political engagement involving experiments with the sustainable communal management of resources (Sivaramakrishnan 2015). In what manner do particular understandings and traditions of virtue animate the practical ethics of people’s individual and collective projects in the world? From his own

fieldwork on environmental cases as adjudicated in courts and environmental tribunals in India, Sivaramakrishnan notes that in integrating the principles of sustainable development into jurisprudence, the courts have relied on environmental sciences that highlight ‘the preservation of ecological balance’ and for readings of ‘meaningful nature’ derived from ‘ethical principles grounded in attachments to land that are produced and anchored in affect, emotion and worship’ (Sivaramakrishnan 2015: 1269). Loss of ecological and cultural security combine with more secular values such as right to life and dignity of livelihoods.

As I prepare this dissertation for submission, the government of India closes the gates on the Sardar Sarover dam in the state of Gujarat, declaring the project successful at the new, raised height of the dam. The struggle against submergence by river waters and eviction, that the project-affected have waged for more than twenty years, has reached a critical phase as villagers across the border from Gujarat, in Madhya Pradesh (where the greatest number of people have been displaced as a result of the Narmada dam), protest that rehabilitation and relocation has not proceeded according to the Government’s own commitments. Villagers whose homesteads and lands are threatened by submergence stand in deep water, as they have done many times before, staging a corporeal protest that visibilizes the connection between community and landscape. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, that has emblemized what a ‘people’s movement’ means in the Indian context, has persisted in the face of state obduracy and repression, and judicial apathy, to become a postcolonial icon of nonviolent protest and indigenous ecological virtue against large-scale industrial and developmental projects that displace local communities without suitable compensation or resettlement. The NBA has brought forth, rather, shaped, a significant body of scholarly work defining an entire ‘field’ of displacement studies (Das 1996) and protest in democratic India (Baviskar 1997; Dreze, Samson and Singh 1997; Nilsen 2010; Whitehead 2010).

I believe that a somewhat different picture of ethics in relation to nature is at stake in my dissertation and to try and explain, I draw on some insights from Veena Das on ethics and everyday life. In a recent essay, 'Ethics as an expression of Everyday Life', Das asks if the ethical must be located in moments of 'named virtue' or discernible ideals that we pursue through ethical acts, or might we think of ethics as 'embedded in the most ordinary of actions which might also as easily be transfigured into a negation of ethics'? (Das 2012). Are ethics only visible when ordinary routines break down, or at least, when people stand outside the 'flux of life' to decide on rules and norms of conduct, or 'are ethics woven into forms of life and the task of anthropology is to make this weave of life visible' (Das 2012). Is a domain of the ethical 'locatable' in moments when agreed upon criteria for judgement are arrived at, or, as the philosopher Cora Diamond, after Wittgenstein, suggests:

"We may...think that there is thought and talk that has as its subject matter what the good life is for human beings, or what principles or actions we should accept; so then philosophical ethics will be philosophy of that area of thought and talk. But you do not have to think that; and Wittgenstein rejects that conception of ethics. Just as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any world and thought. So the contrast I want is between ethics conceived as a sphere of discourse among others in contrast with ethics tied to everything there is or can be, the world as a whole, a life (Diamond 2000, 153).

Anand Pandian and Daud Ali, in their volume on forms of ethical life in South Asia write similarly of the everyday as the ground of ethics; the volume focuses on "the ways in which people practically engage themselves and their worlds as being invested with moral potential" (Pandian and Ali 2010).

This present study attempts such a grounding of an ethics of nature in the routines and preoccupations of everyday life, treating the everyday not as a 'willing acceptance of repetition or habituation, but as a constant reinhabitation'. As much a search for both ecological and material security and improved social status animated people's everyday

projects, these were also shadowed by atrophy and the possibilities of failure. Both ethical life and a negation or refusal of ethics come to the fore. In the third chapter for instance, Madagaur's villagers ask Balwant to come to their village and 'bring development' their way as well. When he informs them about the SRI scheme however, they respond with saying that soil and climatic conditions do not facilitate intensive cropping techniques. My many observations of such 'scenes of instruction' where villagers engaged with the improvers of their landscapes, were filled with contrary moments when an improved life was both sought for, and refused on the terms on which it was offered. Recall, similarly the interview with Lalla and Bare in Chapter 4, where they correct Balwant's picture of the law as one of a failure of implementation. For the villagers of Ranjra, and Titrahi (where the cattle-grazing incident took place), the expectation that the state be responsive to their needs and sufferings did not stem from a place of rules and laws, but rather from histories of encounters and engagements in which the familiarity and strangeness of state officials and villagers to each other, was negotiated each time, anew.

The Baigachak has in the past few years emerged as a key site for ecologists and activists studying the claims process under the FRA. While several reports (cited in Chapter 4) have stated that individual titles, community forest rights, as well as 'habitation rights' for Baiga have been awarded, recent studies have suggested a dissonance between the success of the FRA 'on paper' and the actual experience of villagers (Ramanujam 2017). Reasons for a 'weakening' of collective action to secure rights over forest are attributed to the retrenchment and withdrawal of NGO staff due to funding cuts; the need to maintain cross-caste affiliations and connections in order to sustain connections for benefits and livelihoods, that 'undermine' Baiga connectedness to forests; continuing fear of the draconian forest department; an expansion in communication and education infrastructure which has increased mobility and the desire amongst youth to migrate to the foothills and cities in search of tertiary sector jobs

(Ramanujam 2017, 47-48). In this dissertation, I focus on many such moments of 'weakening' or atrophy in collective life, suggesting that these are instead 'waxing and waning' potentials of life itself, unfolding.

In the light of these developments, the somewhat worrisome question that comes up pertains to the re-enclavement of the Baiga as forest dwellers, idealized environmental-legal subjects who must perform attachment and authenticity both to community and nature, in order to avail some minimal security of tenure. Schutzer (2013) notes that 'custom' in the context of the FRA denotes a political economic category 'strongly associated with both historic recognition and redistributive justice' (Schutzer 2013). The FRA, argues Schutzer, is contingent upon the 'legal articulation' of a 'co-constructed sense of ecological spaces' (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000) that contests conservationist claims of forest spaces as external to social relations and therefore in need of reservation and enclosure (Schutzer 2013, 2). The FRA is therefore contingent upon the reproduction of a 'forest ecosystem' which is actually actually in use, and not abandoned, by forest-dwelling communities. Therefore, villagers like those of Madagaur, whose attachment to 'the forest' does not fit within this framework of environmental stewardship, will be relegated to being marginal claimants under the law. My ethnography aims to capture those registers of life and practice that forge an ethics, politics and aesthetics of dwelling in nature, that cannot easily be enframed within legal, statist, or indeed, existing scholarly categories.

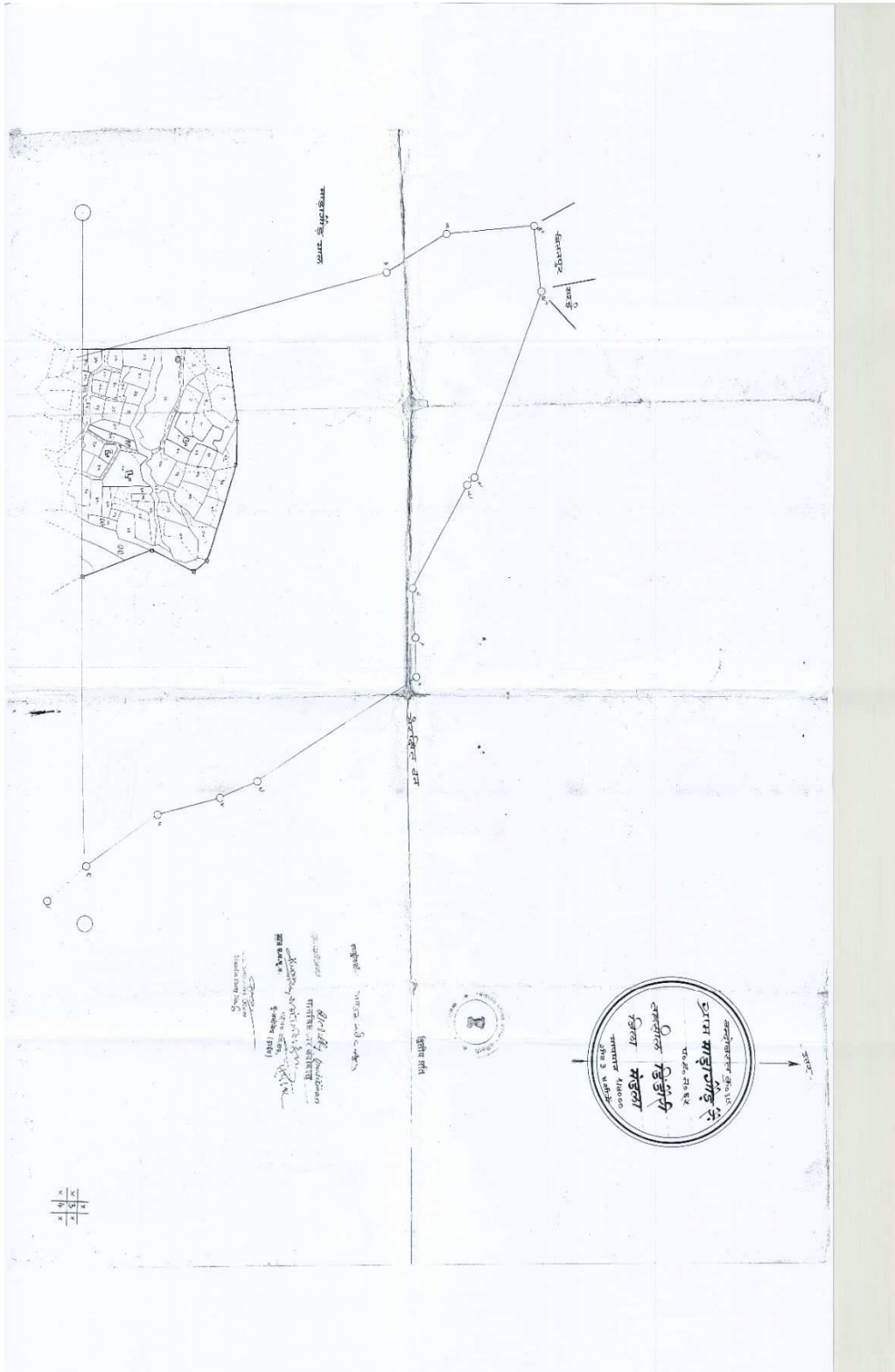
Through an ethnography of the Baiga, a particularly vulnerable tribe domiciled in central India, this dissertation thus explores how contemporary indigenous selves and subjectivities are embodied, expressed and produced in relation to natural worlds, in ways that respond to and engage with, but are not determined by historical and present-day interventions that attempt to redefine and reform their lives and landscapes.

Revenue Map of Madagaur



Appendix 2

Revenue Map of Madagaur



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Education

- 2006 –2017 PhD, Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.
Fieldwork and Dissertation Research: Indigenous and tribal communities in India; Politics of access to land and forests; Ecologies of Perception and the Senses; Anthropologies of dwelling, belonging, movement and displacement; Environmental and Ecological Anthropology; Human-non-human relationships.
PhD Expected: October, 2017.
- 2010 MA Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, U.S.A.
- 2001- 2003 MA Sociology, Department of Sociology, Delhi University, II Division, (59.5%)
- 1998-2001 BA Economics (Hons.), Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University, I Division (60%)

Professional

- 2017 Fellow in Academic Writing, Ashoka University, Sonapat, Haryana.
Instructor: Introduction to Critical Thinking, 1&2
- 2006- 2009 Instructor & Teaching Assistant, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Anthropology.
Instructor: Animals and Humans: Conceptualizing Relatedness, Boundaries and Transgressions (Intersession 2009).
Teaching Assistant: Anthropology of South Asia (Fall 2007); Introduction to Anthropology (Spring 2008).
Graded student performance and led discussions as teaching assistant for anthropology undergraduate classes
- 2003-2004 Junior Researcher at JAGORI, a Resource and Documentation Center for Women, New Delhi.
Conducted fieldwork on the socio-economic status of migrant women laborers in Delhi.
- 2004-2005 Researcher with IDPAD (Indo-Dutch Project for Alternatives in Development), New Delhi.
Conducted archival research on the history of communal and religious conflicts in India

Honors and Affiliations

- 2006- 2012 Hopkins University, Department of Anthropology, Fellowship Recipient

Research Grants

- 2010- 2011 Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research
Awarded a grant to conduct dissertation fieldwork on marginalized 'tribal' or 'adivasi' communities' relationship to their biotic environments in central India
- 2011-2012 American Institute of Indian Studies
Awarded a grant to conduct archival and field research on 'adivasi' communities' relationship to their biotic environments in central India
- 2008 Institute for Global Studies Summer Research Award Recipient (Johns Hopkins University).
Awarded a grant to conduct pre-dissertation fieldwork in India
- 2007 The Program for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality Summer Research Award Recipient (Johns Hopkins University).
Awarded a grant to conduct pre- dissertation fieldwork in India

Publications

- 2008 "Book Review – Philosophy and Animal life. Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond et al". MLN – Volume 123, Number 5, December 2008 (Comparative Literature Issue)

Selected Conference Papers and Presentations

- November 2015 “Viewing, Working, Thinking: Inhabiting and Imagining Space in the Central Indian Forests”. *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association.*
- February 2015 “Dwelling in the Dindori Baigachak: Notes from the everyday life of a forest- community”. *Paper presented at the ‘Religion and Environment’ Conference, South Asia Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies, London UK.*
- October 2014 Work, Play and Storytelling: Aspects of forest-dwelling in Central India”. *Presentation to dissertation working group at the Department of Anthropology, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden.*
- January 2014 “The Everyday Forest”. *Presentation to the Research Scholars Group at the Department of Sociology, Delhi University.*
- October 2013 Forest Conflicts in Dindori, Madhya Pradesh”. *Paper presented at the Annual South Asia Conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as part of a panel entitled ‘Legislating the terms of Place and Property’.*
- April 2013 The body in the Forest: An Anthropology of Dwelling”. *Paper presented at The JHU Anthropology Graduate Student Conference.*
- May 2012 “Preliminary notes on Life in the Baigachak: Place, time, work and pleasure”. *Paper presented at the ‘Environments and Histories’ workshop at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.*

Academic Activities

- Fall 2008 Co-organizer of the JHU Anthropology Graduate Students Conference “Animalities”. *Coordinated a conference on critical approaches to the question of the animal in anthropology*
- Spring 2007 Co-organizer of Interdisciplinary Workshop “On the Empirical”. *Coordinated a series of talks by distinguished faculty concerning the question of the empirical in the Humanities and Social Sciences”.*

Work Related Field Experience

- 2010-2012 Documentation, Transcription and Mobilization work for Ekta Parishad related to the *Jana Satyagraha* people’s march in 2012
- 2014 Documentation and Transcription work for the High-Level Committee on the Socio-, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities in India

Languages

Hindi (native speaker), English (native speaker), Tamil (Fluent)

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